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"How are Vikings mythologised in medievalist media?"

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis presents research in field of medievalism, looking at the way the Middle Ages are used in media and by audiences, specifically addressing the representation of Vikings. My focus is on their depiction in film and TV but I also explore the Victorians' reconstruction of the Vikings. Informed by this research, I conduct textual analysis on a selection of media featuring Vikings. I regard the more recent productions to be the most relevant to my study, representing the most up-to-date examples of Viking imagery. However, I also pay due attention to older works and argue that these older films have intertextually influenced subsequent images of Vikings, as well as ideas of what constitutes a Viking, or 'Viking-ness', for audiences.

With a focus on audience reception, my study branches into notions of authenticity over historical accuracy. That is, what audiences believe to be representative of the medieval, of Vikings, et cetera, regardless of veracity. I discuss how media operate in relation to what the audience's expectations of a historical subject are and how media imagery figures into their consciousness and imagination. I also consider collective memory in relation to the popular imagination of the past. This leads to an exploration of the nature of public history and how fictional historical media can contribute to an understanding of the past while not conforming to, but not necessarily significantly diverging from, the actual historical 'truth'.

Concerning the representation of Vikings, I focus on their integral dualism of barbarian and hero. I further explore this idea by looking at the dichotomy of the gothic and the romantic within medievalism. This argument postulates that the

medieval is constructed between the two polar opposites of the grotesque 'Dark Ages' or a romanticised 'Golden Age'. However, an image of the medieval is often somewhere along this spectrum rather than being entirely grotesque or romantic. Likewise, my research leads me to argue that it is no different for the Vikings – they are not exclusively barbaric (gothic), nor exclusively heroic (romanticised). I also consider how Vikings may be construed as 'mythic heroes' as an answer to the seeming disparity between being barbaric and heroic. To explore this, I utilise theories on myth – specifically those of Jung and Campbell, as these deal directly with the concept of heroism in mythography.

Addressing the sociocultural aspect of this topic, I consider nationalism, with a focus on British national identity and heritage. I explore how heroic myths and popular memories of the Vikings are utilised by contemporary British audiences. I argue that Vikings may function as an aspect of heritage in Britain and as a part of British national identity, again referring back to the Victorian ideas of Vikings. These parallel research areas shift the focus of my study away from questions of accuracy and into the realm of myth and mythical capital. With this I am able to explore the memory of the Vikings in media and how the mythological construction of Vikings as heroic pertains to modern British audiences.

How are Vikings mythologised in medievalist media?

Introduction

The following thesis is a study in the field of medievalism, a sub-discipline which has been defined as the "ongoing process of recreating, reinventing, and reenacting medieval culture in postmedieval times" (Emery and Utz, 2). Specifically, I intend to analyse the representation of Viking characters in medievalist film and TV, applying theories on myth to identify how they may be interpreted as heroic. With this, I aim to explore the ways in which British audiences make use of Viking heroism in terms of national identity.

I have chosen to study more recent productions as these provide examples of the most up-to-date popular ideas of Vikings. However, I compare older texts alongside their modern counterparts in order to demonstrate that heroic Vikings are not only a current trend, but a recurrent one (Harty, 4). In fact, such a conception of Vikings can be traced much further back, to the Victorian period at least (*ibid*.). Moreover, even if the text in question has faded from audience's memories or was never seen by the viewers of more recent productions, it will still have influenced and contributed to subsequent images and popular notions of Vikings, and the medieval.

This is supported by Eco's notion of "family resemblances" (see Figure 1), in which he outlines that:

> Group 1 is characterized by the aspects *abc*, group 2 by *bcd*, and so on. 2 is similar to 1 insofar as they have two aspects in common. 3 is similar to 2 and 4 is similar to 3 for the same reason. Note that 3 is also similar to 1 (they share the aspect *c*). The most curious case is that of 4, obviously similar to 3 and 2 but without any characteristic in common with 1. Nevertheless, because of the uninterrupted series of decreasing similarities between 1 and 4, there remains, by virtue of a sort of illusory transitiveness, a sense of kinship between 4 and 1 (Eco, 2001, 76-77, emphasis original).

Note also that each 'group' introduces a new aspect that was not previously present but becomes a common aspect in subsequent incarnations. The same thinking can be applied to media as they are "genealogical", in that "every new invention sets off a chain reaction [… and] produces a sort of common language" (Eco, 1998, 146). These elements can evidently be mixed and interchanged without sacrificing the 'genealogy' of intertextuality and generic convention. Consider them as "pieces […] not belonging to one puzzle but many" (Deleuze and Guattari, cited in Landy, 2015, xv-xvi). For medievalism, this allows Eco to conceive of "at least ten types of Middle Ages" which all bear their own set of characteristics yet are all 'medieval' (1998, 67).

What is also relevant here is how this concept applies to audience reception. As Anthony Giddens notes, "[n]o text is read in isolation; all reading occurs within frameworks of 'inter-textuality' […] drawing upon mutual knowledge" (cited in Tulloch, 16). In terms of historical media, Sorlin observes that "we refer both to the cinema and to history". With this, audiences acknowledge a "cultural heritage" and

"common basis", which Sorlin terms historical capital. As such, "it is enough to select a few details from this for the audience to know that it is watching an historical film" and to recognise the period it depicts (2001, 37). In other words, medievalist media "contribute to the historical imaginary, both in their diegetic content and also in the modes of narrativization, knowing, and articulation that they deploy" (Groot, 2016, 2). Indeed, as Elliott suggests, it is the "different reinventions of the Middle Ages which have governed and promoted these disparate medieval worlds" (2011, 43; see also Pugh and Weisl, 3).

The films and series I discuss are also limited to being Anglophone productions made mostly in Britain or America; I have chosen these criteria as the most relevant and applicable to a British audience. With this, it may be worth noting that whilst the text may be produced in the United States, I would argue that this does not presuppose an American reading. I agree with Puttnam that American media have "not so much 'stolen' our history as 'simplified' it" (160). Therefore, this does not negate a British reception and as such this is a topic which shall be broached in Chapter III. Furthermore, I focus on the genre of drama, yet Vikings are a recurring subject in an array of different media where they feature as key characters or playing only minor roles. Without even touching upon other forms of entertainment, such as video games or animation, there exists a gamut of fantasy and science fiction media derived from Viking medievalism as well as parodic comedies (Harty, 5-6).

Evidently, with the scope I have outlined here, I do not suppose that this will prove a definitive study. Additionally, this is a metastudy as I have analysed the surveys of Sturtevant and Whitehead where relevant. I would also note that I align my approach

with Service's definition of 'cultural populism', which is not concerned with identifying "particular cultural artefacts as good or bad". Rather, it explores what they "reveal about the culture in which they are produced, and the uses to which they are put" (28). Regarding historical media in particular, I aim to avoid "pointing critical fingers at anachronisms" (Airlie, 165) as medievalism, I maintain, strives not for accuracy but rather authenticity (Elliott, 2011, 215).

Hence, my approach to textual analysis will be focused on interpretation as it pertains to "the average filmgoer" (Lyden, 5). I would agree that:

> we do not need to choose either textual analysis or audience reception studies, […] for it is precisely in interpretation that the text and its reception are connected; to neglect one or the other is to lose the possibility of any real understanding of how the response invited by a film is related to what is actually received by viewers (*ibid.*, 138).

In other words, "we need to analyse what is actually in the film [or TV show], but also we need to consider how audiences may be receiving it" (*ibid.*). Regarding such analysis, one might question whether differing formats (television, Hollywood film) require different processes of reading. However, I would agree that "[f]ilms are simply a different kind of story-telling" and "do not differ in principle from […] magazine fiction, comics, television programmes or novels" (Barker, 48). This is largely due to the notion of "audience responsiveness" (47), as Barker argues that "texts do not have meanings-in-themselves, but *become* meaningful through […] readers interpreting them" (45, emphasis original). Barker's 'pro-filmic' theory

states that “films are not, […] to be regarded as ‘expressions of dominant ideology,’ or ‘cultural expressions of unconscious tendencies’”. Rather, they constitute “imaginative universes” which provide “roles for audiences to occupy” (193).

I would agree with this approach and, as Barker suggests, that it can be extended beyond cinema. Indeed, in the case of television, a text “must always remain polysemic despite its quest for a preferred meaning” (Tulloch, 200). However, it is important to note that this is not to suggest a “pluralism of uses and gratifications theory, for a television work is a *structured* polysemy” (*ibid*., emphasis original). Furthermore, in regards to the traditional differentiation between film and TV in media analysis, I argue that such a distinction is today far less applicable and relevant as the similarities, from production to marketing, mean that “boundaries between cinema and television [have] become indistinct” (*ibid.*, 182-183).

Tulloch argues that “a defining quality of television, in contrast to film, is its segmentation”. Additionally, whilst “cinema audiences are relatively imprisoned within a dark auditorium in a voyeuristic relationship with the narrative”, television offers a less intensive and engaging viewing environment (200). However, for modern audiences this distinction is not so unequivocal. With the proliferation of streaming services and video hosting websites, “the media industry, and what we define as television, has changed” (Jenner, 2). Therefore, a traditional reading that separates film from television may prove somewhat inconsequential here.

Considering British audiences specifically, I will also establish my approach to the role of the national and transnational pertaining to viewership. Jenner argues that, by

viewing media through transnational distribution systems such as online streaming, "the nation must become a more marginal player" (242). However, Jenner also acknowledges that, while such an approach may be theoretically constructive, in actuality "media practices are shaped by social context" (255). Indeed, a film or series may be distributed globally, but the reception by audiences "will be different in different contexts" (Bignell and Fickers, 18). Thus, the significance of the nation within which it is viewed "cannot be ignored" (Jenner, 255).

The first chapter of this thesis will begin by discussing the representations of Vikings through textual analysis. The focus on Vikings in my research stems from the "long-standing dichotomy […] in British attitudes toward the Vikings" due to their complex part in Britain's history, as both aggressive invaders and peaceful settlers (Service, 25). Views on Vikings in Britain have been generated around this duality since, and indeed during, the Middle Ages (Aberth, 30-31; see also Whitehead, 26, 44-45). Vikings have been depicted as the epitomic medieval villains – the filthy, pagan barbarians personifying "arbitrary and excessive violence" (Hirst, 5). Yet, they can also be presented as heroic ancestors – great warriors, inventive sailors or democratic farmers, "glorious paragons held up for emulation" (Service, 139-140).

However, the dualism of Vikings creates a paradox: how can they be heroes *and* villains? The answer lies in how their barbarity is utilised. In other words, a Viking may be one or the other, a hero or villain, at any given time. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that I do not equate 'barbarian' to 'villain'. Rather, I argue that whilst they may possess typically villainous qualities, they may still be construed heroically through mediation and mythography. I will continue as I expand on my

analysis of the representation of Viking characters with the idea of heroic mythography. I employ the theories of Campbell and Jung as these can be seen to "best fit hero myths" (Segal, 28). I will then combine these aspects and explore how, if Vikings may be regarded as mythologically heroic, they can also be violent and barbaric.

Following this, Chapter II will consider elements of medievalism. In particular I will address the notion of the 'medieval imaginary' (Haydock, 36; Elliott, 2011, 35), in which the past is repeatedly remade, reimagined and reconstructed into a gamut of contradictory yet cohesive images. These range between a grotesque Middle Ages consisting of excessive violence, disease and squalor to the romantic, picturesque fantasy of knights in shining armour. Often an image is developed as a combination of several ideas of the medieval rather than existing at the poles of this "fundamental […] dualism" (Matthews, 15-16).

Another element of medievalism that will figure into my study will be that of authenticity, which I mentioned above. It is critical to note that an authentic depiction is not necessarily a historically accurate one: "to be authentic a film need not conform to the historical reality […] only to what audiences *think* the period looked like" (Elliott, 2011, 215). With this in mind, I will consider how media operates in relation to what the audience's expectations of a historical subject are and how they factor into popular consciousness and imagination. I will discuss how the (imagined) medieval setting is significant in the process of heroic mythography and how "dreaming the Middle Ages", as Umberto Eco termed it (1998, 64), is directly comparable to theories on myth. I will use the notion of collective memory to

address the psychological considerations and the social functions of myth in medievalism. Additionally, I will explore how entertainment can be viewed as distributing such myths by "sharing in the same functions that historically have been accorded to religion" (Lyden, 2). The third and final chapter of my thesis will approach medievalist media as an aspect of national heritage, as it concerns the reconstruction of an authentic past. This will lead into a discussion of British national identity and how Vikings can, through their depictions in medievalist media, be regarded as national heroes and therefore a part of British heritage and identity.

The overarching argument of this thesis asserts that whilst Vikings can be seen to represent the epitome of a barbaric, violent, savage and atavistic Middle Ages, in medievalist media they are constructed not purely as an image of a dark, disdained past. Nor are they exactly part of the contrasting romantic nostalgia present in other examples of medievalism. Their depictions contain elements of these, yet when read as heroic mythography, they can be found to be utilised as an aspect of cultural heritage.

Moreover, although in modern renditions they are allowed to be "more rounded" characters (Aberth, 31), ultimately the "stereotype [of the Viking] resets upon aggressive paganism" (Richards, 19). Indeed, "[t]he mere word 'Viking' evokes an image of strong, bloodthirsty warriors, who stopped at nothing to gain loot, land and slaves". Despite this, they "still have a huge following within popular culture" (Whitehead, 16). Their barbarity is not reflected as undesirable or despicable behaviour but as exceptional. Audiences want them to be part of *our* imagined past, to own them as a piece of *our history*, because they are "*our* barbarians" (Service, 147, emphasis original). Thus, they are depicted, and regarded, "simultaneously as

barbarians as well as heroes" (Whitehead, 190). Yet with this suggestion, the question remains as to why we would glorify Vikings, specifically in media, at all. I believe the answer is threefold.

Firstly, Vikings are constructed as a catalyst to propel Britain through the Middle Ages into the now-present future. They commonly face a corrupt or ineffectual English king or save a princess, representative of the future of the nation. Alternatively, they can be a formidable foe that can dramatically change the outlook of the king, or the nation, for the better by posing a serious challenge to the status quo. With this, the violent nature of the Vikings is not only 'historically distanced', as a sign of the times in an altogether violent Middle Ages, (Whitehead, 80-81) but is necessitated by the future of Britain.

Secondly, during the Middle Ages themselves, the Vikings were not merely marauding invaders but also settlers seeking hospitable farmland (*ibid*., 288). Their integration into British society and the cultural trade between the British and the Scandinavians left indelible marks on the nation. Their impact is still considered to be visible in everyday elements, from the names of towns and roads to blonde hair (*ibid*., 193-194).

Thirdly, the reconfiguration of Vikings in the Victorian period imagined the Northmen as representative of imperial British ideals – strength, honour, naval mastery, colonisation. They were "transformed into the progenitors of prized Victorian values (Wawn, 4). The Vikings thus became national heroes and a celebrated part of British history, both drawing upon and feeding into the two other

aspects of Viking glorification above. This shall be explored in further detail, concerning British nationalism, in Chapter III.

Different elements of Viking representation interact and work in tandem with one another in the audience's minds to form a polysemic image of the Vikings which is able to adapt accordingly to an audience's needs, opinions and desires. As Wawn notes it is "precisely because of this capacity to undergo cultural translation and modernisation that the old north has retained its power to attract and intrigue" (371). Thus, I argue that Viking media contribute to and draw upon a cultural 'medieval imaginary' (Haydock, 36; Elliott, 2011, 35), consisting of mediated iconography as well as collective memories and historical capital (Sorlin, 2001, 37). However, they are also interlinked with a Viking mythology, composed of ideals and ideologies, in turn connecting with British nationalism. As such, Vikings are able to be mythologised as national heroes.

Chapter I: The Viking Hero

Representing Vikings

First and foremost, it is essential to observe that 'Viking' is "a nebulous concept" (Richards, 2). In both historiography and popular representations, the idea of a Viking has over time encapsulated a multitude of notions and has often incorporated a mixture of different, or even contradictory depictions all at once: the "concept of the Viking […] contains a wide range of different meanings" (Cederlund, 11). In *The Vikings and The Victorians*, Andrew Wawn comments on the "wide variety of constructions" of Vikings as pirates, traders, farmers, settlers, naval engineers, murderous rapists, proponents of democracy (4). There is a "similar variety of images" in the representation of Vikings in medievalist media (Lupack, 46). This ambiguity of what constitutes a Viking means that "popular culture invokes this archetype without need of explanation" (Tveskov and Erlandson, 35; see also Whitehead, 2).

In Richard Fleischer's landmark film, *The Vikings* (1958), some of this ubiquitous variability of Viking representation is observable in the portrayal of the main characters. However, as will be shown, the primary mode of address is that of the ruthless barbarian. Following an introduction featuring an animated tapestry depicting Viking aggression alongside a dramatic narration by Orson Welles which describes their "reign of terror then unequalled in violence and brutality", the film opens *in medias res* as a Viking attack on an English camp is underway.

The first image presented of the Vikings is that of destructive raiders. They are seen murdering and pillaging in the background of the opening shot in which the audience is introduced to one of the main characters of the film, Ragnar, as he bursts into the tent of the English queen Enid. Following this, a shot inside the tent sees Ragnar immediately kill Enid's husband, King Edwin. This shot frames Ragnar invading the scene from the right as the lighting from behind him casts menacing shadows towards Enid. Alongside this, the dipping ceiling of the tent and the curtains at the edges of the wide shot make the screen seem smaller and enclosed, reflecting Enid's entrapment (see Figure 2).

The use of mise-en-scène here serves to create a sense of threat and helplessness for the audience to identify with. Enid attempts to flee but is grabbed by Ragnar just before she reaches the exit. The doorway is a small gap in the dark interior that fills most of the screen which again visually signifies her inability to escape from Ragnar. The film cuts to shots showing greater detail of the Vikings' fiery massacre, with Enid's loud scream carrying over into this sequence while Ragnar proceeds to rape her off-screen. In several of these shots, the camera pans around quite erratically and the editing rapidly cuts from one shot to the next. The scene is highly cluttered in both the foreground and the background with very little free space on the screen and a lot of fast-paced movement in multiple directions (see Figure 3). This evokes for the audience the chaos of the attack and the panic of the victims, emphasising the depiction of the Vikings as "merciless marauders" (Aberth, 31).

The opening of *The Vikings* was subsequently parodied in Terry Jones' *Erik the Viking* (1989). This, like Fleischer's film, begins with quick, chaotic shots showing

the Vikings burning a village and killing Saxons. The scene then cuts to the interior of a villager's home before Erik breaks through the door in a pastiche of Ragnar's ingression in *The Vikings*. Erik's entrance features similar shot composition and his attire is almost identical to Ragnar's, particularly the helmet which is a focal point of both film's shots (see Figures 4 and 5).

Fleischer's first scene is also alluded to, in a manner less overt than that of *Erik the Viking*, at the beginning of *Vikings* (2013-). While it does not feature the raping and pillaging of Saxons, this too opens with a display of violence in a sequence which again makes use of fast cuts between frantic shots and, like *The Vikings*, the first word uttered is a shout of "Ragnar!". That these later productions refer back to Fleischer's introductory sequence evidences the longevity of such a conception, that of violent barbarians, and demonstrates how this model conforms to notions of the Vikings in the popular imagination.

Similarly, *Alfred the Great* (1969) also starts with a view of the Vikings as barbaric. The film begins with the Danes as a uniformly-clad, mechanical mass of "storm troopers in black and iron" (Snyder, 40) (see Figure 6). After disembarking from their longships and attacking a young Saxon couple in the fields, the Vikings are, once again, depicted burning a village and slaughtering the inhabitants. This is also repeated later in the film with the addition of raping and enslaving a group of nuns. In this opening sequence, the shots are filled with fire and activity, noise and movement (see Figure 7); as in *The Vikings*, this creates a hectic atmosphere and allows the audience to share in the hysteria of the victims.

Both *The Vikings* and *Alfred the Great* clearly emphasise the barbaric representation of Vikings. Yet, in the latter, King Alfred is "portrayed as a man with many faults and weaknesses" while Guthrum is "allowed a certain sympathy and anti-heroic charm" (Service, 143). The scene where Alfred and Guthrum are negotiating the terms of their treaty alternates back and forth between shots of the two, beginning with wider shots but increasingly using close-ups as they continue their discussion. In this sequence, Guthrum is well lit, by the narrow window, and leant forward, towards the camera and the centre of the frame (see Figure 8).

Alfred, meanwhile, is more shadowed and, though still centrally framed, leaning back into the corner, wrapping himself in his robes. This distances him from the camera and consequently, unlike Guthrum, distances him emotionally from the viewer (see Figure 9). The difference in lighting and body language in this scene reflects the diametrically opposed nature of the characters – the jovial Viking and the callous king – enhancing Guthrum's "anti-heroic charm" (*ibid.*). This contrast creates a sense of ambiguity for the audience which blurs the hero-villain dynamic between the characters.

The Vikings, I would argue, also shows an early rendition of the multifaceted, complex Viking. One way in which the film achieves this is through its complicated portrayal of Norse paganism. The film establishes from the outset, in the same way it does with the barbarity of the Vikings, an overtly Christian perspective. The introductory narration concludes with a quote from the "English Book of Prayer": "Protect us, Oh Lord, from the wrath of the Northmen" (see Figure 10). The opening of *The Viking* (1928) features a clear paraphrasing of the same prayer that Fleischer's

film refers to. In Roy William Neill's silent film, a shot of a Northumbrian chambermaid in front of a figure of a crucified Christ is followed by an intertitle which reads "From the sword and the chains of the Vikings, O Lord, deliver us" (see Figure 11).

However, unlike *The Viking*, which maintains Christian overtones throughout, Fleischer's film presents the "power of the pagan god" as being "real" within the diegetic world (Aberth, 47). The scene of Eric's sentenced drowning exemplifies this. Kitala, a significantly religious character as the village soothsayer, prays to Odin to "send a wind to turn the tide". Her wish is granted as a blustering gale arrives "accompanied by violins" and "high-soprano signing" on the soundtrack (*ibid*.).

The religious nature of Eric's salvation is conveyed visually by a shot of clouds passing over a stark white moon. In following close-up shots of the characters, the lighting on their faces becomes correspondingly brighter, contrasting the overwhelmingly dark palette of the scene (see Figure 12). The style of singing, the bright lights and the clouds are all emblematic of divine intervention, especially to a Western audience. They invoke, somewhat ironically, Christian symbolism of typically heavenly or seraphic iconography.

A comparable approach to religion can be found in *Vikings*. Like Fleischer's film, this series immediately acknowledges the apparent existence of the Norse gods in the diegesis. At the start of the first episode, in the aftermath of a battle, Ragnar witnesses Odin and the Valkyries gathering those of the deceased selected to go to

Valhalla (see Figure 13). The first shot of Odin is remarkably short in length, almost instantly cutting away to a close-up reaction shot of Ragnar as he wipes his eyes and squints in disbelief. The next shot shows an empty field swarmed by crows; Odin appears to have vanished, perhaps a figment of Ragnar's imagination.

A shot of Ragnar shows him turn his head in another direction followed by another wide shot of Odin walking through the battlefield; this one lingers longer than the previous shot. Another reaction shot of Ragnar precedes extreme close-ups of Odin and a corpse he stands over suggesting that this is real (within the diegesis). We then see a shot of the sky as the ghostly Valkyries descend before cutting to another reaction shot of Ragnar as his eyes track their movement, which again gives the audience the impression that this is not imaginary.

Here we can see the same duality found in *The Vikings*. In the first few moments of the show, the audience witnesses the brutality and violence of the barbarians. Yet it is also shown that their pagan beliefs should be given serious credence.
This religious aspect is recurrent throughout the series and it is often addressed in direct comparison to Christianity. However, *Vikings* presents more than just a sympathetic portrayal of paganism; the narrative arc of the Christian monk Athelstan leads him to engage with Norse beliefs and embrace much of the Viking way of life.

By the beginning of the second season, Athelstan seems to have fully transitioned into a Viking. For example, during the second episode, Athelstan joins the Vikings on a raid in England (see Figure 14). During the battle sequence he is commonly shot with other Vikings in the background. Alternatively, shots of him fighting the

English soldiers on his own cut to similar shots of other Vikings doing the same. This creates a visual link between Athelstan and the rest of the raiding party. His clothing, his axe and shield, and his shaggy hair are key in a fast-paced action scene such as this so that the audience can quickly identify whose side he is on; clearly this serves to visually associate him as one of the Vikings. *Vikings* thus subverts the trope of Christianity serving as a transformative and "civilizing" power to the 'savage' Vikings (Dupree, 126-127).

The Last Kingdom (2015-) also contrasts the convention of Christianity civilizing the Vikings by depicting a Christian 'converting' to paganism. In the first episode of this series the main character, Uhtred, is introduced as a child who is uninterested in and sceptical of the English culture and religion that surrounds him. Consider an early scene where he is speaking about pagan religion with Beocca, the priest of his father's household. During their conversation, the lighting on Beocca is relatively bright and illuminates his face well, while Uhtred is in shadow. While the two-shot used frames the pair tightly together suggesting a close relationship between the two (which they indeed have), it also creates a distance between them by placing Beocca in the foreground and Uhtred in the background.

The focus of the camera shifts between Uhtred and Beocca rather than using cuts, causing one of them to be blurred while the other is in focus. Additionally, they rarely make eye contact or even look at each other during this shot, both for the most part staring off-screen, in different directions. Utilising such methods, this shot suggests that while they have a relationship there is also a disassociation between

them, a difference of character, as Uhtred is signified to be unlike Beocca (see Figure 15).

Later in the episode, Uhtred's father is killed by Earl Ragnar Ravnson who takes Uhtred with him as his adopted son. He quickly adapts to Viking culture and the episode skips ahead to an adult Uhtred embracing Danish life much more than he did his native English ways. A scene where Uhtred is talking with his new father in the Viking settlement makes use of a close side-on two-shot of Ragnar and Uhtred together, both in focus, facing each another (see Figure 16). This shot is also cut together with over-the-shoulder shots which frame the two tightly together.

Uhtred and Ragnar's attires and hair styles are similar creating an obvious visual comparison between the two; this is emphasised by the two-shot which makes them seem like mirror-images of one another. Moreover, the colouring of their clothing blends with the brown and grey palette of the background making them seem domestically linked by the setting as well. These techniques all starkly contrast the previous scene with Beocca, instead creating for the audience a sense of familiarity, similarity and connectedness between Uhtred and Ragnar.

One might question whether a character such as Uhtred should be considered as a Viking; factors such as his parentage may be considered discriminating. However, evidently, he is visually constructed according to Viking iconography. As such, he is received as a Viking by other characters as well as by the viewer. It would appear that being raised a Viking, or choosing the Viking lifestyle, is enough both in a diegetic sense and as the audience is concerned. In fact, Uhtred in *The Last*

Kingdom, Athelstan in *Vikings*, Eric in *The Vikings*, and even Alwin in *The Viking*, all demonstrate that an English character is able to become Viking. This is reflected visually, particularly through their wardrobe which often serves to identify these characters with their Viking counterparts and differentiate them from the English.

By 'becoming Viking', English characters can be viewed as ethnographic ancillaries, as a bridge for the audience to enter the Viking Age and connect with their atavistic way of life (Dupree, 126). Michael Hirst, creator and executive producer of *Vikings*, notes that the character of Athelstan was developed with this very intent: he acts as "a guide into a past and lost culture" in order to "introduce a contemporary audience into" the Viking world (Hirst, 6). This in turn adds an additional layer in which to consider Vikings as heroic. The audience may naturally perceive Vikings in a more positive light and not *only* as barbarians if they are, in some cases, represented by characters with whom viewers can more directly relate.

Vikings as Heroes

Vikings, then, can be "portrayed as ruthless villains or the greatest of heroes" and these extremes of representation are integral to Viking characters. Even when this traditional dichotomy is not distinctly clear there still remains some form of exceptionalism: a Viking "cannot be simply ordinary" (Service, 64; see also Bennett, 96). Barnes questions why this is necessarily the case, why it is that they cannot "simply exist and be interesting in their own historical context without needing also to be exceptional" (Barnes, T. L., 13).

The reason for Viking exceptionalism, in both popular culture and in historiography, Barnes argues, is due to a widespread view that there is a "lack of exceptional people" in the present (*ibid.*). In other words, the "reassessment of traditional Viking imagery through a sympathetic lens […] [may be] influenced by nostalgia for the bravery of the heroes of the eddas, a general courage and sense of duty which is often felt to be lacking in a post-heroic age" (Elliott, 2013, 175). Joseph Campbell acknowledges this concept of exceptionalism as inherent to heroic mythography: the "composite hero of the monomyth is a personage of exceptional gifts" (Campbell, 37). A Jungian view of hero myths also insists on this; Jung describes a hero of myth as "a being of more than human stature" (Segal, 7). This exceptionalism is one way in which Vikings can be seen as mythologically heroic.

In *The Vikings*, Eric and Einar both display their superior physicality in the battle at the end of the film, despite both having been physically impaired earlier in the narrative (Einar is blinded in one eye and Eric loses a hand). For example, there is a memorable scene in which Einar scales the drawbridge, to lower it so the Vikings can enter the castle, by climbing up a 'ladder' of axes thrown into the wood and hoisting himself up the chain. The use of a low-angle shot as Einar climbs makes the castle wall seem even larger and more imposing (see Figure 17). After cutting to shots of archers firing down at him, the sequence uses a long shot that again makes the castle wall seem enormous. This shot is filmed from the side to also show the seemingly insurmountable verticality of the façade (see Figure 18).

Einar continues to climb; we then see him from above (see Figure 19). In this shot, what is conveyed is not only the challenge of ascending the castle wall but the mortal danger of the potential fall as the majority of the screen is taken up by the rocky moat below. Two more long shots are used in this sequence before he triumphantly rides down on the lowering drawbridge. One of these long shots is particularly far out, reducing Einar almost to a speck on the screen, which is nearly entirely filled by the castle. These achieve the same effects as the previous shots – making the castle seem gigantic and thus expressing to the audience the monumental task of Einar's ascent, further emphasising the exceptionalism of his feat of strength.

In *Vikings* we can also see physical excellence in the leading characters. Ragnar Lothbrok is shown to be an exceptional warrior. For example, in the sixth episode of the first season, 'Burial of the Dead', Ragnar defeats the Earl of his village, Haraldson, in single combat. For the most part the fight sequence uses a variety of two-shots and over-the-shoulder shots, often framing them at eye-level to one another, which signifies to the audience that they are more or less equals in combat. Haraldson's formidability as a warrior is evidenced early on in the duel; one shot in particular conveys how he initially gets the better of Ragnar. In this shot, after Haraldson strikes, Ragnar limps backwards away from the camera, while close in the foreground we see Haraldson's leg advancing into the centre of the frame. Haraldson, quite literally, has the front foot here (see Figure 20).

The battle between the two Vikings continues back and forth until finally Ragnar, nearly defeated, finishes Haraldson. Interestingly, there is no shot that clearly signifies a shift in the power dynamic in Ragnar's favour. In a succession of quick

shots, Ragnar counters Haraldson's final blow to inflict his own. I would argue that such a conclusion to a duel which largely presents the combatants on level terms, shows that Haraldson is also a great fighter (he is a Viking too, after all). Ragnar is thus depicted as exceptional even in direct comparison with other exceptional warriors – the best of the best, as it were.

Vikings also shows Ragnar to be exceptional in other ways, in his ingenuity and cunning, for instance, which he uses to solve difficult problems and trick his enemies. In the tenth episode of the third season, 'The Dead', Ragnar manages to gain entry to Paris after an unsuccessful siege not by force but by negotiating with the French. He tells them that he is dying and requests a baptism so that he can be given a funeral procession to the cathedral to receive "a proper Christian burial". To the shock of the Parisians, however, Ragnar is not dead.

One shot in particular, as Ragnar rises out of his coffin, clearly signifies the instantaneous shift in power in this scene (see Figure 21). Ragnar takes up nearly half the frame standing imposingly over Emperor Charles and the archbishop, who are pushed down into the lower left corner making them seem small and insignificant. He leaps down and pushes his knife to the emperor's throat. As the emperor backs away, a subtle shot tracking their movement gradually moves closer to Ragnar making him larger on the screen and bringing him centre-frame while applying an inverse effect to Charles.

Following this, we see a shot which puts Ragnar front and centre and places both Charles and the archbishop at the bottom of the screen, hidden behind objects on the

altar and barely in the frame at all (see Figure 22). These shots again signify Ragnar's complete control over the situation and his enemies. He dominates the environment and, by extension, the whole of Paris. After stabbing the archbishop in the neck and taking Princess Gisla hostage, Ragnar proclaims "I win". A succinct declaration which suggests that this ploy was merely a game to Ragnar, from which he emerges victorious by outwitting his opponent with, relatively, very little bloodshed.

Ultimately though, Ragnar's infiltration of Paris is still an act of aggression; but that is not to say that Viking exceptionalism is wholly predicated upon violence. While it is perhaps the most common and visible aspect, Vikings are also shown to excel at sailing, farming and even peaceful diplomacy. However, violence, while not the only form of exceptionalism, is an aspect which is seemingly integral and inescapable in Viking representations.

The varying degrees of exceptionalism outlined here contribute to the complex Viking image described above. Transitioning Vikings to this "more nuanced […] more neutral" representation (Dupree, 130) has resulted in them "no longer [being] presented as the uncivilized Other, [… or] a plain warrior […] with bellicose morals, but as a hero with moral conflicts" which may resonate with modern audiences (Calderón, 292). This in turn allows for Viking narratives to be seen as hero myths. The image of a Viking as "a formidable warrior who is never, or rarely, defeated […is] one of our imagination" (Barnes, T. L., 13) which conforms to the Jungian model of imbuing the mythic hero with exceptional talents as a method of psychological projection.

This projection onto the hero is not only essential to mythography but is the "prime function" of myths according to Jung. For him, a myth "does not inadvertently reveal the unconscious", but does so intentionally, because "its creation is guided by the unconscious". In other words, the reason that humans create these myths is to express something symbolic from the unconscious to the conscious minds of the recipient, which may include the creators themselves (Segal, 17).

However, Jung also acknowledges a social function in myth in "providing a guide" for how to behave and act: the "lives of characters in myth become models to be emulated" (*ibid.*, 21). Campbell addresses this notion as well but argues that rather than a model to "imitate […] literally", a hero myth instead offers a symbolic example "to be contemplated", which in effect marries Jung's internally psychological and externally social functionality (319).

Campbell argues that, for a model of literal emulation, it is "not human failure or superhuman success but human success" (207) that is necessary in the myth, yet he observes that this is generally not the case as "the makers of legend have seldom" depicted "great heroes as mere human beings" (319). Instead, a hero is often "endow[ed] […] with extraordinary powers from the moment of birth" which suggests that "herohood is predestined, rather than simply achieved" (*ibid.*) and therefore impossible to replicate. The "ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage" thus provides not a specific behavioural ruleset but a "general pattern […] formulated in the broadest terms". With reference to this "general human formula" an individual reflects on "the unsolved enigmas" of the human condition (121) as the myth seeks

to instil or encourage the broad and nebulous ideas, values or feelings that exist in the unconscious mind.

Campbell defines specific elements prevalent in hero myths and how they interact with each other (see Figure 23). He suggests that whether the hero is "ridiculous or sublime, Greek or barbarian", there is "astonishingly little variation in the morphology of the adventure, [or] the character roles involved" (38). However, he also stresses that this plan is representative of common themes and so a narrative need not focus on, or even feature, all of these aspects to qualify as a myth: "If one or another of the basic elements of the archetypal pattern is omitted […] it is bound to be somehow or other implied – and the omission itself can speak volumes" (*ibid.*).

Campbell outlines the "standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero" as a basic process of separation, initiation and return which he calls "the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (30). The myth begins with a "call to adventure" where the hero must leave their home or comfort zone and travel to unknown lands (58) in order to achieve a "macrocosmic triumph" and bring about the "regeneration of […] society as a whole" in some way (38). Such a journey into the unknown is a common feature of many of the texts I have discussed: *The Vikings*, *The Viking* and *Vikings* all primarily revolve around travelling West to discover a new world (England, or America in the case of Neill's film). This voyage is usually signified by an image of a Viking longship sailing across a vast sea, often through fog or a storm (see Figures 24-26). This suggests both an adherence to Campbell's monomythic structure as well as a consistency of Viking iconography in the popular imagination.

The narratives of the media I have analysed can also be found to involve many of the other themes which Campbell outlines. However, that they conform to this model is not surprising as it is intended to be universally applicable. The fact that it is relevant to such a vast array of narratives, Viking or otherwise, elucidates Campbell's argument that at their core hero myths have "little variation" (121). This a point which other theorists have made, including Otto Rank who, in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, maintains that "all hero myths, if not all myths, […] have a similar plot" (Segal, 16).

What is perhaps more pertinent to acknowledge here however is that the narratives of the discussed media do not exist independently, rather they are shaped by and in turn reshape the story they are telling. In other words, "the film producer who employs mythic narrative contributes to its existence in culture" (Solomonik-Pankrashova and Lobinaite, 122). While they were produced decades apart, both *Vikings* and *The Vikings* concern similar characters, drawing upon the same source material and contributing to the same pool of popular imagination. They offer variations of Viking heroes and as a "myth consists of all its versions", these texts must be considered intertextually "in connection with a system of other myths, social practices and cultural codes" (*ibid*.).

Campbell's theories on myth have been lambasted on the basis of gender, with critics of his work arguing that he objectifies and marginalises women (Nicholson, 187). It is true that he does almost exclusively write using masculine pronouns and with a focus on male heroes. However, he also expresses the view that a hero is essentially "the man or woman who has been able to battle past […] limitations […

through whom] society is reborn" (19-20). Campbell also suggests that the message of the hero myth is not concerned with external identity but with internal and social humanity; he argues that "the differentiations of sex, age, and occupation are not essential to our character". Rather, hero myths are designed to address "what it is to be [hu]man, […] the basic character of our being" (*ibid.*, 385). I have thus far discussed the leading male characters, but this is not to say that female Viking characters are not also mythologised in similar ways.

The Viking presents a somewhat complicated representation of women. The scene where Helga Nilsson is introduced sees her fall off a horse and sprain her wrist, to then be tended to by her male friend Sigurd – on first impression, she seems vulnerable and fragile. Yet, when he appears to be hurting her while binding it, shown by several close ups of her wincing in pain, she pulls away to do it herself; she is seemingly as tough and self-sufficient as any Viking then. However, she is immediately sexualised in doing so: the camera pans to show her locking eyes with the captive Lord Alwin as she holds her bandage between her teeth, followed by a series of shots alternating between the two to show their lingering eye contact. In a mid-close-up in this sequence, showing her torso upwards, most of the screen is taken up by bare skin, complimented by her gold-bronze armour, with her made-up face placed provocatively centre-frame (see Figure 27).

Following Helga's sexualisation however, she seems to regain her Viking independence: entertained by Sigurd purchasing a slave, she decides to take Alwin for herself. A wide two-shot in this scene clearly emphasises the power balance between the two characters. Helga is standing upright next to Alwin looking down

on him, her hands placed assertively on her hips, adorned with gold and brightly coloured fabrics. In contrast, he is sat down and dressed in a plain, drab grey vest which, along with his black hair, blends with the dark background suggesting that, as a slave, she sees him merely as an object rather than an equal in any sense (see Figure 28).

As the slave-trade scene ends, Helga and Sigurd leave the trading post in a two-shot as they laugh together about the acquisition of their new slaves. Contrasting the prior two-shot with Alwin, this one is much closer and frames Helga and Sigurd tightly together. Sigurd is also, unlike Alwin, dressed in gold-bronze armour and red clothes with flowing auburn hair, mirroring Helga's appearance. In this way, the shot demonstrates the equality of these two characters, as fellow Vikings (see Figure 29).

However, later in the film, the intercharacter dynamics shift and Helga's role regresses. She becomes side-lined as merely a love interest for the three lead males – Leif, Egil, and Alwin. This change is visually emphasised through the mise-en-scène and cinematography. Halfway through the film, she ceases to wear armour, as she had earlier – aside from a brief scene where she disguises herself as a male Viking, with a horned helm and fake beard, to join Leif on his journey west – instead being clothed in dresses and gowns. Moreover, after she is discovered on Leif's ship, she is repeatedly shot through a doorway, often being looked in on by her male suitors (see Figures 30-33).

In the doorway shots of Helga, the composition frames her in ways which create a sense a claustrophobic domesticity – she appears smaller, lower, interiorised. She is

no longer compared as equal to the other Vikings, as she was with Sigurd earlier in the film. Rather, at this point, her clothing and the lighting contrast her against the set and the men which all have a darker colour palette. This, along with her central framing, emphasises the other characters' (and the audience's) male gaze by objectifying her, inverting the way in which Alwin was differentiated and objectified as a slave in the aforementioned trading post scene.

The notion of equality for Viking women is more clearly seen in contrast to non-Nordic women. In *The Last Kingdom*, compare two scenes of Uhtred riding through a forest, one with his Viking lover Brida, the other with his English wife Mildrith. These are similar to the two scenes discussed above, which featured Uhtred with Beocca and Ragnar. Here, Brida is represented as an equal to Uhtred. This is evident through the use of mise-en-scène and, as with Ragnar, clothing creates a visual link between the two characters. While Brida's are a lighter colour than Uhtred's grey furs, her horse is dark and his horse is pale. This creates a conversely complementary palette emphasised by having half of the screen space each (see Figure 34). This visually equates the characters for audience, uniting them by their Viking culture.

Contrary to Brida, Mildrith is differentiated from Uhtred. Interestingly, this scene uses a similar shot to the one with Brida, even utilising a similar visual link between light and dark clothing and horses (see Figure 35). Although Mildrith is still connected to Uhtred, as his wife, the connotation here is different; they are not represented as equals. Unlike Brida, her clothing has no resemblance to Uhtred's; her pale blue frock and long white cloak almost blend in with the snowy backdrop. Moreover, the simple addition of Leofric in the background changes the dynamic.

Less spare space on the screen, with none left between the couple whatsoever in this shot, makes the scene feel more enclosed. Leofric serves as a very visible reminder for the audience that the connection between these Uhtred and Mildrith is one that is essentially enforced, for his English wife in particular, by King Alfred and the church.

To be Viking, then, is represented as indicative of female equality and autonomy. It has been argued that the idea of "an egalitarian Viking society where women held sway with men" is fictitious and it "was not their reality", merely a way of "projecting ourselves onto the past" (Barnes, T. L., 10). However, whether historically accurate or not, the reality of women's roles in Viking society is not overly important here. Of more relevance is the fact that women are represented in this way. Barnes may be correct in suggesting that media producers are inaccurately projecting feminist values onto historic narratives and that the Vikings in particular, in the nebulous polysemy they embody, "provide several opportunities for us to modify the past to suit our own ends" (*ibid*., 8).

However, from a mythological perspective the shaping of a narrative to suit specific needs is a process of reflecting social views and desires allowing a sphere in which to process ideas or information. In this, the narrative "serves to reaffirm and validate those things we hold dear" (*ibid*., 10). Thus, while it may be true that the "figure of the Viking often represents a very specific form of masculinity, one that encompasses notions of violence, dominance, and other aggressive traits" (Sigurdson, 250), it is also evident that Viking women, at least in modern representations, can also be envisaged as possessing these qualities.

Jung's insistence on recurrent fixed archetypes (Segal, 16) may go against the notion of the Viking I have argued for, as it is not one consistent figure but "nebulous" (Richards, 2). However, another view of myth posits that:

> when scrutinized in terms not of what it is but of how it functions, of how it has served mankind in the past, of how it may serve today, mythology shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age (Campbell, 382).

Therefore, while my argument might differ from a Jungian approach in this manner, following Campbell I would maintain that Vikings can be seen as mythic heroes. This is primarily achieved through exceptionalism as I have evidenced above.

Heroism and Barbarism

A central element to Viking representation is the "binary opposition" of "ruffians or heroes" (Service, 5). It may be tempting to work under the assumption that because the mode of representation is that of the 'grotesque barbarian' then it rules out the potential for heroism but this is not necessarily the case as can be seen in the examples described thus far. In fact, Michael Hirst stated that while he "needed a hero" for *Vikings*, that leading character did not "have to be a good person" (History Canada, 2015). Ragnar Lothbrok, Uhtred and Eric are all protagonists in their respective narratives. Even Einar is to some extent a secondary protagonist, as the

real villain is Ælla. The exception to this is Guthrum of *Alfred the Great* who is undoubtedly the antagonist, although as also addressed previously, he does possess an "anti-heroic charm" that makes for an arguably more likable character than Alfred.

However, the protagonists of the media I have discussed all demonstrate a capacity for typically villainous behaviour namely in the form of excessive violence and cruelty, in some cases to greater degrees than any antagonists. Furthermore, despite Viking representation evolving into more rounded figures in more recent productions, the level of violence has also increased – though this is perhaps reflective of the "ever-increasing doses of violence" in media in general (Lyden, 84). A convincing example of this can be seen in the act of the so-called 'blood eagle',[1] a notoriously gruesome method of execution and torture. This has "proved too lurid to be invoked in many visual representations", including *The Vikings*:

> Although Viking barbarism is one of the themes around which the film revolves, that barbarism is only permitted to go so far. The sight of Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis extracting an enemy's ribs would no doubt have had a disastrous effect upon the film's rating (Service, 137).

However, *The Vikings* by today's standards is "far less bloody and violent than anything that we might see […] on network television" (Kelly, 15). Indeed, several decades later, *Vikings* provides a plot based on the same source material as

[1] The blood eagle was supposedly an execution method which involved prying open the victim's rib cage followed by the extraction of internal organs, usually the lungs, in order to 'display' them on the corpse.

Fleischer's film (the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok). However, in the History Channel's series, the blood eagle is not considered too lurid to be depicted. In fact, *Vikings* shows this violent act (as well as many others) in graphic detail. It appears not once but twice, first in the seventh episode of season two, 'Blood Eagle', when Ragnar performs it upon Jarl Borg for his betrayal.

Borg's blood eagle is one of *Vikings*' more disturbing scenes, featuring extreme close-ups of the torture (see Figure 36) with focus on blood spattering, pooling on the ground, dripping onto an ornamental human skull. This puts the audience as near as possible to the violence in order to 'feel' the pain by evoking an emotional response, or even physical revulsion, mirrored by the reaction shots of the Viking onlookers. This is prolonged (the scene lasts over five minutes in total, roughly ten percent of the episode's running time) and emphasised by the use of slow-motion shots and editing with relatively long pauses between cuts. The unsettling absence of diegetic audio further enhances the effect, as Norwegian band Wardruna's eerie 'Heimta Thurs', with its Nordic chanting and whispering, beats on the soundtrack. The scene ends with a shot from above to present the excess of the blood eagle in a wider context than the preceding close-ups, showing a great amount of blood on the execution stage and Jarl Borg's ripped back (see figure 37).

Vikings are clearly shown to be excessively physically violent, but they also commit acts of sexual violence,[2] which might arguably be more repugnant to a modern audience particularly in comparison to historical or fantasy violence (Cipriani,

[2] Of course, sexual violence is also a form of physical assault causing physical damage. I differentiate here between sexual and 'physical' violence only in order to discuss rape separately from murder, torture, etc. as it pertains to Viking representations.

2015). Sexual violence, much like the physical violence discussed above, appears to have become inseparable from Viking representations:

> The phrase "rape and pillage" has become almost synonymous with Vikings. [… It] acts as a shorthand for any and all Vikings crimes, whether real or fictional. [… As such,] the image of Viking rape is one that is firmly ensconced in our modern imagination (Sigurdson, 249).

Evidently, "forms of violence against women have become an iconic aspect" of popular representations of Vikings (*ibid.*, 264). However, it is often the case that "only marginal or unlikable characters […] rape, and they are often punished for their actions" (*ibid*., 252).

A scene in the fourth episode of the first season of *Vikings*, during the raid on the town of Hexham, shows an antagonistic Viking, Knut, attempt to rape an English woman and then Lagertha after she stops him. This scene is dimly lit with cluttered set dressing and frantic shots which create an uneasy, claustrophobic atmosphere (see Figure 38). This is starkly contrasted with consensual sex in *Vikings*. For example, in the sixth episode of the first season, Ragnar and Lagertha's love scene has warmer lighting, particularly on her face, along with slower pacing and the use of a steadier camera which frames the couple close together (see Figure 39).

Likewise, in *Alfred the Great*, after Aelhswith and Alfred's wedding, the king rapes his new wife (off-screen), further tarnishing his already unlikeable character. Afterwards, Aelhswith slumps by the bed, wrapping a gown around her, as she prays

to the “Holy Mother” to ask whether “all men show such violence”. This sequence uses primarily close-ups on her face as she delivers her monologue but cuts to a wider shot showing her on the floor. The scene is very dark with a small candle the only light and the black bed takes up most of the frame, giving it fittingly imposing and threatening look. This works to give the room the appearance of a dungeon or a crypt rather than a royal bedchamber, further emphasising the negative connotations ascribed to Alfred in this scene (see Figure 40).

Alfred’s rape of the queen contrasts a later scene between Guthrum and Aelhswith. While she is a hostage with the Danes, Guthrum (despite encouraging and participating in rape elsewhere in the film, such as that of the nuns) tells her that he wants her to love him. He wishes for her to sleep with him of her own volition. She does so, and a scene where the pair are in bed together appears to be a direct counter to the above scene in Alfred’s room. Here, we see the majority of the frame taken up by bare skin in a soft, warm glow which is, again, emitted by a single candle on the right of the screen. However, this time the closer shot makes the room seem full of light and the candle seems considerably larger by being placed in the foreground. This can easily be read as a phallic symbol used to compare the two males on the basis of gender, equating Viking virtues with a more positive masculinity. That is to say, this serves as a visual signifier denoting Guthrum as the ‘greater’ man (see Figure 41). Guthrum, then, “play[s] the part of the gentle lover” (Snyder, 40). Thus, while sexual violence is a prevalent theme in Viking narratives, it is rarely committed (at least on-screen) by characters which audiences would regard as heroic.

Barnes questions what could be "appealing" about violence in protagonists before concluding that "the allure comes from several aspects of who we *think* the Vikings were and who we *want* them to be" (Barnes, T. L., 8, emphasis original). The development of Viking characters into more heroic figures and the greater neutrality in approaches to their representation arguably allows for "an ideological space where Viking alterity is considered desirable" (Dupree, 130). Service suggests that the appeal of the violent Viking compared to other barbarian characters may be dependent on the "degrees of foreignness" to the audience, noting that "Huns, Mongols and the Tartars are inescapably the Other to Western perceptions" while Vikings can be perceived as "*our* barbarians" (147, emphasis original).

Even villainous Vikings can be appealing to audiences because "a large portion of the Vikings' popularity as cultural icons is due to their aura of lawlessness". Service observes that this is comparable to other areas of popular culture relating Vikings to "the outlaws of the Old West whose fame has far eclipsed that of the lawmen", offering these as examples of "villains or anti-heroes who are more beloved than the heroes themselves" (147-148). Moreover, it is not only the Vikings in these narratives that are depicted as barbaric. Fleischer's *The Vikings* "realistically conveys the bloody savagery of which both sides – Viking and English – were perfectly capable" (Aberth, 43) as Ælla cuts off Eric's hand for giving Ragnar a sword before he leaps into the wolf pit to die, the pit which earlier in the film had convinced Ragnar that "the English are civilized".

Vikings also shows that the English can display a high capacity for barbaric violence. For example, in the fourth episode of the second season, Athelstan is crucified

(though not killed) for being an "apostate" after surrendering to the English. In fact, this scene bears many resemblances to the aforementioned blood eagle. Like Jarl Borg's execution, this scene utilises slow-paced close-ups to bring the audience nearer to the grotesque violence on the screen, with shots of dripping blood and nails being hammered into Athelstan's hands. This scene too uses an uncomfortable lack of diegetic sound (aside from one scream from Athelstan as he is affixed to the cross) in favour of the song 'Bjarkan', another Nordic tune by Wardruna. The crucifixion similarly concludes with a wider overhead shot which, again, shows the violent excess contextually by emphasising the amount of blood that has been shed (see Figure 42).

Evidently, *Vikings* uses the scenes of Borg's blood eagle and Athelstan's crucifixion to make a comparison between the English and the Vikings through punishment and torture. This link is evident from the audiovisual similarity I have described, particularly as these episodes are both from the same season. The importance of this is that if violent crimes are perpetrated by both the English and the Vikings, if they are equally barbaric, then this cannot be a factor which precludes heroism. I would argue that the graphic violence is not only inseparable from Viking characters but can actually be seen as an element of heroic myth. The "stunning visual of an act of unspeakable cruelty", such as the blood eagle in *Vikings*, provides the viewer with a way to "get one's aggressions out by living vicariously through people who lived in an age where they could act in ways that we cannot" (Barnes, T. L., 11).

Indeed, whilst audiences may "ideologically […] abhor violence", especially that which is "gratuitous, graphic, cruel or excessive", they can also take pleasure in

seeing such violence in media (Elliott, 2011, 59). There is evidently an "appetite for extreme images of violence" in film and TV because they continue to be successfully produced (Lyden, 84). Evidently, modern audiences are "less averse to glorying […] in the delights of paganism, epic slaughter, and fantasy heroism" (Griffiths and Harding, 3). This leads to a consideration of the psychological side of 'barbaric heroism', echoing the Jungian function of hero myths. Stjepan Meštrović suggests that "preferring barbarism" can be seen as "a natural element of the human psyche" due to the "necessity of maintaining both order and disorder, within society and within each human being". Vikings thus embody a "cathartic excess" of disorder with which an audience might identify in response to the order of everyday life (Service, 149-150; see also Lyden, 84).

Catharsis has also been associated with medievalism more generally. The setting of the Middle Ages is often used "to project taboo images and actions" as it provides a "legitimate and respectable space" wherein audiences can safely observe and experience behaviour that is considered "unrespectable or vulgar, decadent or debauched, outmoded or primitive" (Higson, 2009, 217-218). Vikings, like "pirates, gunfighters, [… or] gangsters" are "figures who take the law into their own hands" as they are "not always bound by the stultifying rules of civilised life". For this reason, they are often "romanticised […] even though the reality of their activities is often sordid and bloody" (Service, 243). Hence, the Viking "in the popular imagination is a figure of excess: of […] unrepressed paganism, and unrestrained violence" (Bennett, 96). Yet, their undeniable barbarism does not prevent Vikings from being construed as heroic.

Chapter II: Past and Present

Imagining the Middle Ages

The Viking, then, can serve as "a heroic, savage, and ancestral figure" which "constitutes a complex archetype that we hold up to provide a distorted mirror image of ourselves". This 'reflection' "reveals not only how Vikings are perceived but also […] how we see ourselves" (Tveskov and Erlandson, 45). Vikings can be found to embody "qualities that contrast our perceived modern successes against our savage ancestry". However, I would argue that they are not presented exclusively as 'savages' in a grotesque dark age, but simultaneously provide "nostalgic images of what we think we have lost" and "represent qualities that we like to think we embrace" (*ibid.*, 46).

The dichotomy between the heroic and the barbaric found in the representation of Vikings is also a factor of medievalism more generally. In European and British culture, the Middle Ages "have a double identity". Broadly speaking, "we either feel something is missing in modern society, for which we nostalgically return to an idealised construct of the Middle Ages" or, on the contrary, "we despise the Middle Ages as a primitive and dark age, which we have outgrown thanks to modern science and culture" (Vercruysse, 2). Matthews argues that this "distinction between a gothicised and romantic medieval" is the "chief dualism in contemporary understandings of the Middle Ages, whether scholarly or popular" (15).

The dualism of the gothic and romantic can be described as a "pointedly 'dirty' realism" (Williams, D., 18), placed in opposition to an idyllic image where what is presented is "an idea, a vision of" the Middle Ages, "like a medieval painting" (*ibid.*, 7). However, Matthews stresses that these two spectral opposites are "extreme perceptions" (16) but are "not necessarily mutually exclusive" (15). He explains that the definition of the medievalist image that is presented is "often a matter of where it ends up in relation to these poles" (15). In fact, "in practice the poles are never reached and rarely approached" (Williams, D., 7).

Furthermore, a grotesque image, though it may often be associated with realism, is not more valid than a romantic depiction and is "no less stylized" (Salih, 29; see also Sturtevant, 93). This is because the "opposition between them is an unstable one with many intervening nuances" (Matthews, 16). Medievalism therefore "allows for a range of specificity in the unique image[s]" of the Middle Ages (Woods, 2004, 47). Thus, crucially, there "is no fixed popular idea of the medieval" (Matthews, 16). Rather, the Middle Ages, are "open to interpretation" due to the fact that "the word 'medieval' can evoke such wildly disparate ideas […] and can be used in such remarkably different contexts". As such, one can surmise that "there is something peculiar about the Middle Ages that gives it a remarkable malleability within the popular imagination" (Sturtevant, 1-2).

Malleability in images of the Middle Ages contributes to the ways in which "popular culture interacts with, interprets, and both influences and is influenced by the actual history of the Middle Ages" (Aberth, ix). This allows medievalist media to "evoke any number of disparate medieval worlds by relying on a medieval imaginary"

(Elliott, 2011, 35). This concept constitutes the consensus understanding of what can be generally identified as essentially 'medieval' and is an integral aspect of medievalist media which "contribute to and rely upon an imaginary Middle Ages" (Haydock, 36).

The "prior knowledge of the medieval" has been "built up from watching films and from other sources" (Woods, 2004, 47). Therefore, medievalist media present an image of the past "based [not only] on a historical referent, but [… also] using already available signifiers for the medieval" (Vercruysse, 27; see also Calderón, 288; Young, 1-2). In other words, medievalist media are "fantasies built upon fantasies" which can often be influenced by fictionalised medievalism more than the history of the Middle Ages (Pugh and Weisl, 3; see also Alexander, 138-139). As such, medievalist media should not be seen as "the recreation of history, but […] the construction of the period based on" this cinematic and cultural imaginary (Elliott, 2011, 41).

We can observe that the imagining of the Middle Ages is applicable to representations of Vikings; modern depictions often draw more from previous constructions than "any historically-based reality" (Richards, 177). For example, the scene in *Vikings*, in which a young Alfred and Ivar the Boneless play a game of chess (see Figure 43) draws not upon any historical source but likely alludes to a similar segment in *Alfred the Great*, which I mentioned above, in which King Alfred and Guthrum discuss the terms of their treaty over a board game. This comparison also provides an example of intertextuality as a complex genealogy of "family resemblances" which I referred to above (Eco, 2001, 76-77).

Furthermore, popular understandings of the Middle Ages are fluid and constantly revised. People's ideas will "change as they encounter new iterations of the medieval" (Sturtevant, 4). Each reimagining of the Middle Ages will necessarily alter public views and "induce a new generation of visions" (*ibid.*). Moreover, popular notions of the Middle Ages are not only culturally constructed but "culturally specific" (*ibid.*) meaning that the medieval imaginary of Italy, for example, will undoubtedly contain different ideas to that of Japan.

The medieval imaginary can "at times threaten to overwhelm the Symbolic […] saturating our sense of the Real" (Haydock, 36). This has an effect on what the audience regards as authentic: "in some instances the medievalism has become the 'reality' or […] what the interpretive community comes to expect" (Dupree, 41). The topic of authenticity is one which Elliott has discussed, asserting that "to be authentic a film need not conform to the historical reality […] but only to what the audiences *think* the period looked like" (2011, 215, emphasis original).

That medievalism relies on authenticity is due in part to Jauss's theory of reception which relates to the audience's "horizon of expectations" (Jauss and Benzinger, 13). In other words, in the repeated use of generic conventions, the audience "comes to expect it" which can result in the historically "inaccurate" becoming "authentic" (Elliott, 2011, 215-216). In the case of medievalist media, Woods argues that "we are extraordinarily tolerant of inconsistences, perhaps because our feeling for the authentic can be sustained by what seems typical, […] that [which] we expect of medieval reality" (2004, 47). This is largely dependent upon the "perceptual realism" of visual cues and signifiers (*ibid.*, 41). In order for medievalist media to be

considered as authentically depicting the Middle Ages, the content need only be "*perceived* to be medieval" (Bildhauer and Bernau, 2, emphasis original; see also Vercruysse, 61).

Creators of medievalist media thus strive "to create images that are at once convincing, recognisable and understandable as being 'medieval' to a contemporary audience" (Vercruysse, 26). Indeed, the past "is characterized by its unfamiliarity, its otherness" and yet "that unfamiliar world must be recognizable to us; expectations about what is medieval must be fulfilled" (Williams, D., 4). Authenticity creates "a world, […] which we have agreed to recognize as medieval" (Woods, 2014, 4). In other words, medievalist media depict an image of the past "as one chooses to make it […] that is recognizable and unquestionably medieval" (Bennett, 107-109). However, to reiterate, collective notions of the medieval do not necessarily have "specific historical referents" (Emery and Utz, 2). Indeed, the inventions of medievalist media may in fact "seem more real, because [they are] more familiar" (Lowenthal, 1998, 14). Medievalist media need not accurately reflect 'real history' because, as Jonathan Rosenbaum remarks, "[i]t doesn't matter if the historical details" are accurate, as long as they "look authentic to the audience" (cited in Driver, 6; see also Clements, 23).

It is widely agreed then that medievalist media do not attempt to reproduce history; their intent rests on depicting the "appearance and feeling" of an authentic past, rather than "the historical past" itself (Young, 7). Due to this, it may be tempting to assume that medievalist media merely employ the setting of the Middle Ages "as a pretext" (Vercruysse, 33) and that they "have no meaningful link" with the medieval period itself (*ibid.*, 39). This view suggests that the historical setting is insignificant

and is simply offered as an analogy for the present (*ibid*., 269; see also Bildhauer and Bernau, 2). However, while medievalist media may address present concerns, either explicitly or surreptitiously, this is done "through the past" (Vercruysse, 39).

To ignore the medieval setting, to analyse medievalist media only with a presentist perspective, suggests that the Middle Ages are "interchangeable with any other period" (*ibid*., 269, emphasis original). However, I would argue that, in fact, the opposite is true of the medieval period as the Middle Ages can be seen to hold "a unique position in Western cultural history" (*ibid.*, 51). While the medieval can seem strange and atavistic in many ways, it is also "close enough for us to recognise it as *our* history" (*ibid*., 269, emphasis original). This is opposed to "the classical world", which is considered to be to be 'dead' and lacking continuity with the present (Kudrycz, 121; see also Stafford, 7; Eco, 1998, 64-67).

One might determine that medievalist media make attempts to "convince their audience[s] that they are watching real history" (Vercruysse, 28). This view is supported, to some extent, by the way in which historical media is promoted and marketed to audiences. For example, the History Channel claims to provide veracity in its programming by offering viewers "all of history, all in one place" (Taves, 262; see also Anderson, S., 19). As such, one might conclude that audiences would expect historical media to "represent history as it was" (Vercruysse, 30). However, even where a historical film "appears to show the truth, it in no way claims to reproduce the past accurately" (Sorlin, 2001, 37). While medievalism may "strive to present [the] 'reality' of the past in authentic fashion" and a version of events that is "in some way true" (Groot, 2009, 181), both creators and audiences are aware of the

constructedness of this form of popular history (Bisson, 147). Therefore, 'as it was' is not an accurate analysis of audience expectations.

Moreover, it is not only popular history that involves construction, but rather all historiography: "each attempt to write history is […] no more than a version of the truth" (Alexander, 140). Hence, the notion, purported by Otto von Ranke, that a historian could objectively seek "what *really* happened" is largely a fallacy (Munz, 150). Hayden White suggests that while historians may have professed to be presenting the past "as it really was", in actuality they "arranged historical facts in various highly contrived ways [… which] did not pertain to any historical reality" (Kudrycz, 2; see also Landy, 2015, xii-xiv). Indeed, "history must tell a story" (*ibid.*, 9; see also Munz, 142; Brown, 182; Edgerton, 8). Medievalist media's fictionalizing of the past can therefore be seen as a "modern continuation of a tradition of popular invention" (Williams, D., 13): "by making the past in their own image and for their own purposes [… people are] practicing history the way it has always been done" (Barnes, T. L., 15).

Evidently, "[s]torytelling, whether fictional or historical is a practice of ordering and attribution of meaning" (Ellis, 12). However, with this I do not suggest that 'official history' is in any way false or meaningless. On the contrary, the subjectivity and structuring of a historical *narrative* allows for the consideration of historical media as a retelling of that story and thus a means of *understanding* history. Indeed, varying a historical narrative allows it to be communicated to different people across different generations. Historical media "do not simply bring history to life: they allow it to go on living" (Norris Nicholson, 104).

Medievalist media, then, need not present 'real history' but must instead be "*perceived* as being realist" (Vercruysse, 30, emphasis mine). Medievalism concerns itself with the authentic, which is a matter of perception and "what the audiences *think*" signifies the Middle Ages (Elliott, 2011, 215). The notion of absolutely accurate and transparent history on screen is ultimately an impossible goal. Historical media cannot depict "a literal rendition of events that took place in the past" and can "never be an exact replica of what happened (as if we knew exactly what happened)" (Rosenstone, 1995, 61). Indeed, history in media "must be fictional in order to be true" (*ibid*.; see also Groot, 2016, 175).

Even if we had "perfect knowledge of the Middle Ages as they were", it is unlikely that a modern audience would "recognise it as *genuinely* medieval" (Vercruysse, 26, emphasis original). In the process of reimagining the Middle Ages, medievalist media has always "altered history" (Aberth, xi). In order to "communicate with the present audience" (Williams, D., 4) any reconstruction of the past can only be achieved "through a revisioning that inevitably replicates modernity and its concerns" (Kelly and Pugh, 1).

Hence, medievalism is "not about the literal truth, 'like it really was', but deals with the past in a symbolic and metaphorical way" (Vercruysse, 9). Indeed, "using history to affirm myth" underpins a cultural understanding of the past (Kessler-Harris, 40). Therefore, if medievalist media do not attempt the replication of history but seek to understand and interpret the past, then "fidelity to historical evidence […] become[s] less relevant than […] what is appropriate to the medium" (Airlie, 63). As such, one can observe how medievalist media are both a product of and contributor to the mythography discussed previously. Both medievalism and myth "develop an

imaginary view of "that which is," [… which] is always linked to a notion of "that which should be"" (Lyden, 78). As Edwards acknowledges historical media do "not just offer a depiction of 'what happened'; [… but also] what people *think* happened" (53, emphasis original).

In other words, medievalist media do not have to, nor try to, present 'real history'. They do not reflect *the* past but rather depict *a* past, which is "fictionalized and historicized" (Kelly and Pugh, 1), one which is authentically realistic so that the audience can, and wants to, believe it to be true in order to construct an imaginary heritage. A past "that cannot and does not exist, insofar as it is fictional and the past is irretrievable" (Groot, 2016, 3); it is "not real but possible, supposed, desired or feared" (Buonanno, 74). In this manner, medievalist media present "a *customised* version of the past" which, though constructed, remains "recognisable and meaningful" to the audience as "a version of *their* history" (Vercruysse, 51, emphasis original).

Memory, Myth, Imagination

If it is not a matter of retelling history 'as it was' but rather 'as we wish it were', then it may prove more useful to consider medievalism from a psychological perspective. This approach also relates better to myth which, as I outlined in the previous chapter, "originates and functions to satisfy the psychological need for contact with the unconscious" (Segal, 3). Elliott, referencing Jeremy Black's *Using History*, argues that public history and collective memory have become "merge[d] at what were once clearly divided tangents" (2011, 25; see also Edgerton, 1-5; Anderson, S., 20).

Indeed, “visual media have contributed to, and continue to contribute to, an expanded and altered understanding of what constitutes historical thinking” (Landy, 2015, ix). As we do not have any “personal and direct experience” of the Middle Ages (Ferré, 134), it can be argued that understandings of the medieval consist of “what you can remember mainly from films and television” (Williams, D., 20).With this, we can observe that medievalist media “continuously rework the material while at the same time being constrained by its received patterns and favourite stories” (*ibid*., 13). In this sense, medieval history becomes, as far the general public is concerned, a “mingling of the real with the idealized” (*ibid*., 6). Such a conception of history as concocted by popular opinion invokes an idea of the public ownership of history, which crosses into memory studies. Accordingly, history becomes “a bit of fact mixed with a bit of fiction in order to preserve tradition and tell good stories” (Barnes, T. L., 15).

Raphael Samuel acknowledges the significance of “popular memory” as a form of ‘unofficial’ historical knowledge, observing the importance of popular invention and imagination in public history as “memory and myth intermingle, and the imaginary rubs shoulders with the real” (6; see also Connerton, 40). Medievalist media can be considered as a part of this popular history, being a key source of information for the average member of society. It would seem that a great deal of people “are learning most of their history from film or television” (O’Connor, 1201; see also Hunt, 89) and as such the “cinematic Middle Ages represents the way many people really think of that part of their history” (Williams, D. J., 9; see also Lowenthal, 1998, 12).

Therefore, historical media represents “the way a huge segment of the population has come to understand the events that comprise history” and even if the audience is

presented with “fanciful or ideological renditions of history, [they] have an effect on the way we see the past” (Rosenstone, 2006, 4-5; Vercruysse, 3; see also Foot, 186-188). Hence, collective memories of the Middle Ages are an intrinsic and symbiotic part of both popular history and an imagined, cultural heritage. They help to develop “individual identities, social bonds, and larger institutions, and are at the heart of cultures large and small” (Sturtevant, 3).

However, “memory is torn between preservation of the past and creation of an image, always risking that the latter will become a delusion” (Ferré, 134). Remembrance constitutes an “active process in which the past […] is continually negotiated and reinterpreted” (Smith, L., 58). Thus, the construction of popular memories of a communal past, such as that of the Middle Ages, is not necessarily concerned with historical accuracy or “whether the events are historically true” (Whitehead, 264; see also Edgerton, 5). Rather, as I have argued, what is produced by medievalist media is a plausible or possible history, as it might have happened (Buonanno, 73). As such, even media which “make limited claims” to historical veracity are still capable of “profoundly affect[ing] people’s understanding of the past” (Anderson, S., 24). Collective memories of distant history can thus demonstrate “how the past does or does not figure in our lives, and what this in turn tells us about both history and ourselves” (Frisch, 12).

Sturtevant also addresses the medieval imaginary on the basis of memory, employing Alison Landsberg’s ‘prosthetic memory’ theory, which suggests that “the media allows people to experience and even ‘remember’ events in which they did not participate” (4-5). He asserts that images of history, such as medievalist media, are able to achieve such an effect (*ibid.*). In this, medievalist media “present a world

to an audience and let them experience that world as if they were *actually* there" (Vercruysse, 8, emphasis original; see also Buonanno, 18). This is achieved by the very nature of the visual medium:

> [the] indexical quality of the photographic image already gives the impression that we are looking at a reliable and objective registration of reality [… but by] adding sound and movement, […] this illusion is enhanced to the point where the audience can be led to believe that they are actual 'witnesses of the past' (*ibid*.).

Sturtevant goes on to argue that medievalist media can act as a "prosthetic imagination" (5), which is relevant to the medieval imaginary in that notions of the Middle Ages have become blurred between "history and outright fantasy" resulting in a "prosthetic memory mixing with a prosthetic imagination" (91). These prosthetic memories of the Middle Ages are inseparable from, and determined by, the prosthetic imagination because, as I have observed, it is not the real Middle Ages that is being 'remembered'. Moreover, by attempting to represent history "we inevitably bring ourselves into it and reshape it in our own image" (Sturtevant, 8; see also Samuel, 429; Barnes, T. L., 15).

It might be argued that medievalist fictions, through their authenticity, can even "become the 'reality' or […] the dominant expression" of a given idea or image (Dupree, 41; see also Bennett, 105). Baudrillard suggests that if "the real no longer is what is used to be" then there "is a proliferation of […] signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity, and authenticity" (Baudrillard, 12). Finke and Shichtman acknowledge this mythopoeia in terms of media specifically, comparing cinema's "*reproduction* of reality […] with its flickering images of light passing across the

walls of a darkened room" to Plato's cave (Finke and Shichtman, 54, emphasis original).

The cave, like medievalist media, "dupes us into accepting as reality a fantasy – a simulacrum – of that reality" (*ibid*.). Medievalist media provide "a sense of hyperrealism through the subjective experience of the past and accentuating the movement through historical space" (Gallimore, 267), establishing what Clifford Geertz calls an "aura of factuality" (Lyden, 46). Moreover, the "simulacrum is neither real nor copy, but an image that has become truth in its own right; its value depends solely on its being in circulation" (Mayer, 226). In this manner medievalist media become 'hyperreal', by attempting to provide "a substitute for reality, as something even more real" (Eco, 1998, 8) which has the potential to "erase the distinction between historical reality and fantasy" (*ibid*., 42; see also Sorlin, 2001, 41).

However, it should be noted that while the assertion of a 'substitute hyperreality' might be considered to be underestimating audience awareness and conflating a suspension of disbelief with an unquestioning acceptance, what is being discussed here is in regards to medievalism specifically. This notion is not intended to support the idea that the audience can be duped into believing they are watching actual history, as if through a window (Airlie, 170). Rather, viewers are "never really fooled"; audiences are aware that what they are watching is not real (Lyden, 48). Yet, media also "take on the dimension of reality within the context of the viewing" (*ibid*.) because "we do not constantly reflect on the fact of its unreality while we are entertaining a fictitious piece of work – like a daydream" (*ibid*., 52). Media present "an alternate reality in which we participate during the viewing experience".

Consequently, while the audience may be conscious of the artificiality of the mediated reality, it can still have "the power to affect the way we think and act" in the real world (*ibid.*, 4).

Therefore, I would argue that where the text is authentic it can be believed that it is representative of what *might have* really happened (Landy, 2015, 186). As media have "a special capability to convince us of the real existence of what it depicts", when watching the Middle Ages on screen, whatever version they appear in, the audience can "believe they did once exist", as long as it adheres to their notions of authenticity. Not least because "we yearn to see it as we believe it to have been" (Williams, D. J., 10-11). In other words, audiences are "ready to respond to a plausible image of the past, one that confirms and conforms to our expectations" (*ibid*.). As such, the invented past can become true history, to "frame our perception" (Haydock, 7) of the Middle Ages and thus how the past is culturally understood.

In medievalist media in particular, the effect of 'perception framing' is "considerably more powerful" because the content is not "immediately contravened by the reality principle". In other words, "ideas formed during a film set in contemporary times may linger beyond the cinema […] but soon give way to mundane experiences" of the real world (*ibid.*). However, "ideas about the distant past are perhaps more vulnerable […] because there is no immediate access to falsification". Due to the unrelatable nature of the distant past, as opposed to the familiarity of modern-day narratives, it is easier for audiences to accept authentically realistic imaginings as real: the "alterity of the Middle Ages works to make it an especially potent preserve of fantasy, the realm par excellence of the Imaginary" (*ibid.*).

It might therefore be argued that medievalist media can be considered as what Jung describes as "fantasies […] of an impersonal character, which cannot be reduced to experiences in the individual's past". This concept is as an extension upon the Freudian notion of fantasies based on "personal experiences, things forgotten or repressed, and […] explained by individual anamnesis" (Segal, 7-9). Jung argues that these fantasies are not the "creation of an individual" but must be "inherited" and therefore part of a "collective unconscious", stating that these "fantasy-images undoubtedly have their closest analogues in mythological types" (Segal, 7-9).

By fantasizing the medieval through media, it becomes a reinterpretation which is inherited by the audience. Jung asserts that any new interpretation of a myth disseminates "some aspect of the myth […] not previously conveyed" (Segal, 12). Successive impressions of any myth, while they may be reinterpreted or reproduced and may resemble former versions, "are retold because they are perceived as remaining relevant to subsequent ages" (Lyden, 71). The Middle Ages are ultimately other, or "impersonal", to a modern viewer, and so the "fantasy-images" (Segal, 9) of medievalist media are only accessible and relatable via the collective unconscious of the medieval imaginary.

Richard Allen, in *Projecting Illusion*, describes film as a "conscious fantasy" which "we enter into willingly and knowingly, not unconsciously, but which still affects us powerfully in its impression of reality" (Lyden, 52). In the creation and reception of medievalist media, then, what is constructed is "a communal fantasy" (Woods, 2004, 39): "unconsciously we begin to contribute from our own experience, adapting the shared vision to create our own perception of the medieval world" (*ibid.*, 39). This is

the "fundamentally necessary element of invention, of imaginative reconstruction" (Williams, D., 4) inherent in both mythography and medievalism which structures the audience's contemporary sense of reality as well as developing a culturally imagined past. Therefore, medievalist media "can tell us about our own cultural fantasies" (Finke and Shichtman, 4) and this is "the role of all great myths: to provide a resource for an ongoing wrestling with our own cultural questions" (Lyden, 163).

As such, one might argue that "the myth is more important than the history" (Williams, D., 20). Indeed, it would often appear that "the public prefers the fairy-tale legend […] to the inconvenient facts of history" (Aberth, 18). The actuality of history would in fact be beside the point in terms of Jungian mythology as it would constitute "synchronicity" (Segal, 33). For Jung, where a historic figure is constructed as a hero of myth, the "details of [… their] historical life are unimportant". That is not to say that he would dispute their existence nor facts about them, but he suggests that a heroic character is "only of real importance […] as an archetypal ideal" (Lyden, 59).

Evidently, we do not know "exactly what happened" (Rosenstone, 1995, 61) in the past. As such, we "cannot so rigidly distinguish […] "history" from "myth"". With this, medievalist media should not be regarded as "distortions of history". They are undeniably "fictional" in that they are "*made* and represent an interpretation of events" (Lyden, 74, emphasis original; see also Rosenstone, 1995, 54). However, the version of history which they present can be "considered "true," […] not in the historical veracity of the events [… but in the ways in which] they represent a culture's understanding" of the past (*ibid.*, 72). Historicity can be set aside as "there

might be "truth" even in narratives that [… only] have the *appearance* of reality" (*ibid*., 73, emphasis mine).

Thus, we return to the notion of authenticity, what audiences remember and believe to be accurate. Medievalist media's "credibility […] does not rest on the historical truth". Rather, they may be considered true where they are "plausible" and conform to the "symbolic and imagined reality" of the Middle Ages (Buonanno, 74). In other words, "competing acts of pseudoremembrance or idealized medievalism may continue to shape awareness of a shared historical or mythical corpus" (Brown, 179). Therefore, medievalism is a form of "[c]ultural history [which] relies on the *idea* of a model, even while it acknowledges that the model itself is inaccessible and the copy necessarily degraded" (Mayer, 228, emphasis original).

Cultural History

Perhaps none of the notions of authenticity, memory and fantasy I have discussed above can alone offer an altogether satisfactory understanding of the complexities of history in media and the ways in which society engages with the past (Groot, 2009, 249; see also Cannadine, 5). However, they can all be found to contribute to the medieval imaginary and to the notion that history is "an organic form of knowledge […] drawing not only on real-life experience but also memory and myth, fantasy and desire" (Samuel, xxiii). Additionally, although I have discussed the psychological considerations of myth and medievalism, it is important to bear in mind that there is an equally important sociocultural level to the function of mythology (Doty, 48-49). That is to say, myth should not be "reduce[d] […] to a psychological projection" but

should be viewed "as a story that expresses the worldview and values of a community" (Lyden, 4), a story with societal value told via the "communal fantasy" (Woods, 2004, 39) of an imagined past.

Lyden asserts that media can be seen as "sharing in the same functions that historically have been accorded to religion" (2). It has been argued that we live in an "increasingly postliterate world" (Rosenstone, 1995, 50) where media "can act as powerful disseminations of knowledge" (Sturtevant, 4). It stands to reason then that, if traditional religion "has failed to update its myths" (Segal, 35), visual entertainment may take up the mantle as distributor of mythology (Frauenfelder, 210; see also Buonanno, 131). Indeed, media "provide us with archetypal forms of humanity – heroic figures – and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society" (Darrol Bryant, 106).

I would argue that the mythological role of media is of particular significance to medievalism, compared with other, more definitive, history in media. Indeed, "the medieval past plays a role in the cinematic imagination distinctively different from other periods" (Williams, D. J., 9) because the Middle Ages are "an especially potent preserve of fantasy" (Haydock, 7; see also Williams, D., 2; Bennett, 103-104). However, while the medieval in media may often be imbued with fantasy elements, in Europe the actual Middle Ages are "more tangible". Observable in historic locations, remnants or traditions, the period remains a "perceptible presence [… on] cultural identities". Therefore, European audiences may prefer more realist modes of medievalism (Bennett, 92; see also Airlie, 165). Nevertheless, in either fantastical or more naturalistic depictions, it is evident that "in a culture that values the visual over

the printed page, film [and television] keeps medieval history and heroes alive" (Driver, 5).

Lyden argues that religion "does not simply describe the world" and that "art does not simply provide imaginary illusions – both are involved in the complex relationship between the ideal and the real" (48). Indeed, while it has been established that audiences are "aware […] of the fictitious nature" of media, they also have a "desire to believe in it" (52). More importantly, while audiences may be aware of the constructed nature of media, "the imaginary constructions within them can still serve to convey real truths about the nature of reality and how it is believed to be" (54). Medievalism's mythic nature means that it does not lose validity or influence by "being recognized as imaginary" (53). Medievalist media, as I have argued, can be interpreted as presenting the past as people wish it had been. This relates to the way in which myths can "permit the present to be construed as the fulfilment of a past from which we would wish to have been descended" (Doniger O'Flaherty, 31).

Having explored the relationship between media, history and mythography, it can be seen that medievalism "appears to be not all that historical in any direct sense […but] specializes instead in myth, spectacle, and adventure in settings of psychological potency" (Williams, D. J., 9). This is sustained by a collective, cultural imaginary which means that medievalist media "are no longer looking *backwards* at [history …] but have been provided with a *parallel*, ready-made iconography from the great dream factories of Hollywood and beyond". As such, medievalist archetypal images, such as that of the Viking, rely upon "re-invention from film to film" (Elliott, 2013, 166, emphasis original). Therefore, medievalist media can be viewed as "a field for

the exercise of the imagination more than historical reconstruction" and as such "it is also important to consider the ways in which past is made to relate to present" (Williams, D., 6).

One might argue that there is a certain nostalgia, for "a lost Golden Age" that removes "modern problems" (Vercruysse, 43), which can prove "a powerful stimulus for the makers and the audiences of medieval movies" (Williams, D., 6). Yet, as previously mentioned, the Middle Ages have a "dual identity" and can also be seen as "Dark Ages on which we look back with disdain" (Vercruysse, 43). Medievalist media, then, may be influenced be a nostalgic longing for a better or simpler time, or a desire to "glorify modern society" by juxtaposing it with "the barbaric medieval past" (Vercruysse, 279). However, Aberth asserts that medievalism instead "reflects the current mode of how society *wishes* to remember its ancestors" (ix, emphasis mine) and that "how we *choose* to remember the past reveals much about how we live in the present" (xi, emphasis mine; see also Lowenthal, 1998, 16).

Medievalist media, as I have discussed, is used to "present us […] with a past from which we would like to be descended" (Finke and Shichtman, 6), a "fictionalized and historicized past" (Kelly and Pugh, 1). We can observe that what audiences "want" from popular representations of the Middle Ages is "not history at all, but rather something more akin to heritage […] to which we have emotional ties" (Barnes, T. L., 14). This is an important distinction to make as there is "an essential difference between general, amorphous nostalgia […] and the selection of particular groups or periods from history as worthy of being mythologised, claimed, […] and glorified" as part of a society's heritage (Service, 241). Eco acknowledges that "our

return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for 'reliable Middle Ages,' not for romance and fantasy" (1998, 65). However, it can be observed that Eco's distinction "between real and presumably historically verifiable [roots]" and what he terms 'romance and fantasy' "continually collapse" (Finke and Shichtman, 367).

Medievalist media thus provide "an intersection between nostalgia and the illusion of the recovery of a transparent past", which allows modern audiences to "continually return to the past to reimagine our present" and "revisit the Middle Ages to find ourselves" (Finke and Shichtman, 367). In other words, "contemporary popular culture uses the medieval past as a fantasy frame for making sense of our own world" (*ibid.*, 13). In this, medievalist media perhaps satisfies the need for heritage, "that web of connections to the past that holds a culture together, that tells us not only where we have been but also suggests where we are going" (Rosenstone, 1995, 23).

It might be questioned, then, why as a society we would wish to glorify barbaric Vikings as part of our desired heritage, as well as what the implications are of such an aspect in this "ideal medieval past [presented] as the solution to a troubled present" (Aronstein, 2005, 2). Even though they may be permitted a "more rounded and complex" character (Aberth, 31; see also Groom, 10), Vikings appear to exclusively inhabit the "dark, dirty, violent" Middle Ages, leaning heavily towards the gothicised over the romantic. This is even the case in Fleischer's *The Vikings* "despite the hearty jollity of its heroic violence" (Williams, D., 10).

Indeed, at its core, the film is a light-hearted swashbuckling action-adventure narrative. However, the scene in which Einar loses an eye offers an example of the

grotesque elements of the film. After wrestling frantically with the hawk, a close-up shot shows Einar clasping his hand over his fresh wound as a fair amount of blood leaks through his fingers (see Figure 44). The audience is exposed to a slew of scenes depicting, or at least implying, such mutilation as well as torturous death sentences, rape, and other forms of violence and suffering. With this, it can be observed that, while the film lacks solemnity in tone, "a genuine savagery does persist" throughout *The Vikings* (Lyden, 15). Hence, the film also presents the Middle Ages as a dark time of violence and aggression.

However, "the grotesque Middle Ages is not necessarily always offered in a negative sense" and one might consider "the *thrill* of the grotesque, the lure of the illicit" (Matthews, 23, emphasis original). In Chapter I, I discussed the idea that there was a cathartic element that made Viking violence "appealing" (Barnes, T. L., 8) to audiences as well as suggesting that extreme violence of Viking characters did not prevent them from being heroes as "both sides – Viking and English – were perfectly capable" of "bloody savagery" (Aberth, 43). There are, however, sociocultural boundaries on the kinds of violence that can be accepted as heroic: "[c]ontext, subject and tone is important". For instance, "people tend to like scenes where a villain is decapitated but less so an innocent" and "a quick stabbing is more (or less un)appealing than a slow (motion) blood eagle" (Elliott, 2011, 59).

Vikings are routinely depicted displaying 'savage' brutality towards innocents, such as the slaughtering of helpless villagers or monks in their raids, and as such they are ultimately still represented as pagan barbarians. Yet this barbarity, I would argue, is not depicted as altogether undesirable or despicable, nor is it entirely an illicit thrill. Rather, it is an element which audiences want to be part of "a *customised* version of

the past" and "*their* history" (Vercruysse, 51, emphasis original). Vikings are "*our* barbarians" (Service, 147, emphasis original) and this is "how society wishes to remember its ancestors" (Aberth, ix).

Furthermore, audiences "do not literally emulate" the violence they witness in media but it provides an opportunity for them to "step outside their normal social roles". It is possible that they may feel admiration toward violent heroes for representing values such as "courage and personal strength in being willing to fight and sacrifice for others" which audiences "may attempt to appropriate […] into their own lives in nonviolent forms" (Lyden, 152). As I mentioned in Chapter I, the hero myth is not a model to follow literally, but one "to be contemplated" (Campbell, 319). Moreover, myth in medievalism should not be considered a method of indoctrination of ideology through audience passivity. Rather, audiences actively engage with what they are watching and are often aware of "intentional and unintentional anachronism, and the imposing of contemporary social or political values on the past" (Driver, 5; see also Airlie, 164). Instead, hero myths can be seen as "ideal[s] we *choose* to follow and *allow* to govern how we live and see the world, […] ideals we *want* to work toward" (Lyden, 21, emphasis mine).

It may be true that we "continually return to […] the Middle Ages to find ourselves" (Finke and Shichtman, 367), yet with this we are presented with "an intriguing paradox in wanting to return to an age we try to distance ourselves from" (Vercruysse, 53). I would argue that it is precisely this paradox that allows for the potency of heroic mythography in medievalism. The Middle Ages are "close enough for us to recognise it as *our* history" but "far enough removed to […] project our more fundamental concerns" (Vercruysse, 269, emphasis original). The imagined

cultural heritage of medievalism provides comfort and reassurance because “we know for sure where we came from, even if it is a past we knowingly, at least partially, fabricate” which in turn “informs not only who we are but where we are headed” (Barnes, T. L., 14).

Chapter III: Viking Ancestry

Heroic Heritage

As I outlined in the previous chapter, medievalist media can offer a culturally desirable past via collective memory and popular imagination. They "converge to build an acceptable version of the past and must adapt themselves to the constant shifting of that vision" (Sorlin, 1988, 14). In so doing, medievalism becomes an aspect of heritage; medievalist media "about Britain or British characters work as national cinema, mythologizing the national heritage, [and] the nation's heroes" (Higson, 2009, 222). Heritage provides, much as medievalism does, "an imagined, not an actual past" (Lowenthal, 1998, 14). Lowenthal argues that "[h]eritage is not a testable or even plausible version of our past; it is a *declaration of faith* in that past" (*ibid*., 7-8, emphasis original).

Lowenthal's notion of heritage further emphasises my argument that the historicity of, in this case, the Vikings is willingly supplanted for an imagined past that is chosen to be claimed as national legacy. Indeed, "[w]e elect and exalt our legacy not by weighing its claims to truth, but in feeling that it *must* be right" (Lowenthal, 1998, 7, emphasis original). In other words, a part of the past that is regarded as heritage is glorified "not because it *is* true but because it *ought* to be" (*ibid*., 8, emphasis original). Stafford argues that "[o]rigins are themselves chosen, [and] constructed". Our origins "define us [and] are themselves defined by us" (7). As such, heritage is concerned not with "checkable fact but credulous allegiance" (Lowenthal, 1998, 7) in a past that people wish, and readily believe, to be true. Lowenthal asserts that

heritage "should not be confused with [official] history" which "seeks to convince by truth". Rather, heritage "exaggerates and omits, candidly invents […] and thrives on ignorance and error". It is thus a "more flexibly emended" version of the past (*ibid.*, 7).

In a similar fashion, medievalist media is often criticised on the basis of historical accuracy, but as I explored in Chapter II it is of greater importance here that the representations believably conform to audience expectations. That medievalist media often feature anachronistic "[d]epartures from history" is of little concern to the average viewer for "[m]ost neither seek historical veracity nor mind its absence" (Lowenthal, 1998, 13; see also Groot, 2009, 4). That is, as long as the past presented is plausibly authentic and, in some way, desirable, audiences will accept "credible falsehoods" (*ibid.*, 18). In fact, Rosenstone argues that historical media "must be fictional in order to be true" (1995, 61). Fabrication, therefore, is an inherent necessity in both medievalism and heritage in order to develop national identity (Lowenthal, 1998, 9; 19). Through this selective celebration and omission of different parts of history, "heritage reshapes a past made easy to embrace [… which] the public enjoys consuming" (*ibid.*, 13; see also Groot, 2009, 4).

That national heritage involves fabrication and invention should be unsurprising, for the nation which it is designed to reflect is in itself a popular construct (Smith, L., 48-49): "[n]ational identities are, like everything historical, constructed and reconstructed" (Gillis, 4). Chris Barker defines national identity as "imaginative identification" with the nation through "systems of cultural representation" (cited in Bignell and Fickers, 16). In fact, Anderson argues that "all communities […] are

imagined", defining a nation as "an imagined political community" where each person, however physically disconnected they may be from other people of their nation, holds in their mind "the image of their communion" (Anderson, B., 6).

The national community is "shaped by shared myths of origins and a sense of common history" (Langlands, 54; see also Asari et al, 3) provided by national heritage which in turn relies upon social constructs, cultural semiotics and 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm, 14; see also Smith, A. D., 1991, 11). Nationalism, it should be noted, is considered here not in a political sense, but in terms of collective ideology and culture: "mythology, symbolism and consciousness" (Smith, A. D., 1991, 91; vii; see also Jenner, 201). Bignell and Fickers suggest that "audiences are also imagined communities" (23) and with this we can explore how this relates to national identity for the audience. Through historical media "the national past is quite literally staged and made generally accessible" (Higson, 1995, 42; see also Groot, 2016, 49). Jenner argues that film and television "interpret 'our' history" and "work to inform citizenship with 'the nation'" (205). Indeed, historical media often prove "a potent way to articular national myths and nationalistic events" and allow national identity to be "continually in flux and negotiated" (Groot, 2016, 49-50).

Thus, by reinterpreting the Middle Ages through a nationalistic lens one can conclude that medievalist media fulfil the objectives of national heritage. To "rewrite the past", in order to construct national identity, is an essential element of heritage. Indeed, "[f]alsified legacies are integral to group identity" (Lowenthal, 1998, 11); or as Ernest Renan puts it, "[g]etting its history wrong is crucial for the creation of a nation" (cited in *ibid*., 9; see also Asari et al, 8; 25). This is, to a large extent,

achieved through visual representations of the past, such as medievalist media (Smith, A. D., 1991, 11). These images become mixed with, sometimes indistinguishable from, the reality of the nation's history (Smith, A. D., 1999, 166; see also Whitehead, 278). By adapting history in this way, to better suit nationalistic ideals, heritage conforms to "ways in which [present] society wishes its history to be remembered […] and [expresses] which values are held within its collective identity" (Whitehead, 295-296; see also Smith, L., 4). Medievalist media, I have argued, function similarly. The "modes of contrivance" are comparable to that of heritage (Lowenthal, 1998, 12). Medievalism can therefore be seen as being a contributor to, as well as a reflection of, popular notions of a nationalised past and thus national identity.

Heritage, then, "passes on exclusive myths of origin and endurance" (Lowenthal, 1998, 8). That these national myths are "irrational" or "lack historical integrity" does not devalue their sociocultural significance (*ibid.*, 9). As such, even if claims of ancestry in relation to, for instance, the Vikings, are "based on assumptions, circular reasoning, and fantasies", it does not preclude the significance of such national heritage nor make this legacy any less real (Guttormsen, 96). Rather, national myth, in this way, constructs a "renewed reality" (*ibid.*).

Whitehead's study suggests that the majority of people surveyed "considered themselves to have a personal connection with the Viking[s] […] within the framework of their national identity" (18). Popular constructions of Vikings are thus shown to be "relevant for present society and national identity", being able to "influence perceived communal […] traits […] and help establish social unity" (19-

20). Both in England and Iceland people held similar views of the Vikings, despite their "raids, pillaging and plundering" of Britain. In fact, every one of the survey participants from these nations "agreed that the Viking age was an important part of their country's identity" (274). Moreover, even people who could not relate the Vikings to their personal identities still considered them relevant "on a national level" (302; 259).

Furthermore, national heritage is "not based on accurate historical knowledge but idealised images of the past" (273). These "misreadings of the past […] become cherished myth" which are crucial to the development of national identity (Lowenthal, 1998, 9-10) and reinforced in collective memory (Lyden, 71). People's understanding of the Vikings is based on "preconceived ideas about their society's past" (Whitehead, 19). In other words, as I have argued, a sense of national heritage is purveyed through popular culture and mediated images. Additionally, when presented with historical information that did not align with the popular notions of Vikings, this "contradicting knowledge […] yielded to the stronger image originating in collective memory". Therefore, it is clear that the Vikings have "deep roots of national identity" within collective memories of the medieval past (*ibid*.).

However, because "memory and identity are not fixed things, […] we are constantly revising our memories to suit our current identities" (Gillis, 3). The received history of the Vikings is notoriously violent and so "requires re-interpretation by social collective memory in order to create a cohesive national identity" (Whitehead, 66). There exists a "need […] for the link to the Viking age to be favourably preserved" because many people regard Vikings as "an important part of their various collective and personal identities". As such, the perceived "positive contribution" of Vikings in

Britain, "neutralized their 'negative' actions". Through this, the Vikings' part in British national history is "interpreted [… to reflect] the needs of present society" (*ibid.*, 239-240) and "Viking warriors become a positive part of national identity and memory" (*ibid.*, 80-81).

I would acknowledge at this stage that, while I am discussing Britain's overarching national identity, there is a certain equivalence made between British and English. However, I would argue that this is justifiable, perhaps even unavoidable. There persists a degree of interchangeability between these national identities; this "unconscious conflation" is a recurrent condition in Britain, particularly on the part of English people (Langlands, 53). This is largely due to what Tom Nairn describes as the lack of a "coherent, sufficiently democratic myth of Englishness" (cited in Higson, 1995, 44). Indeed, Whitehead notes that in the case of the English survey participants, "it was not always clear whether they were referring to 'British' or 'English' identity" (21). This "difficulty [… in] defining a distinctly English identity" (Langlands, 60) may have been influenced by England, historically if not presently, serving as the "demographically dominant and cohesive ethnic core" (*ibid.*, 55).

That is to say, England has, arguably, provided Britain as a whole with "cultural heritage and political traditions" throughout the nation's history and as such one might expect "predominantly *English* historical myths, [and] values […] at the core of *Britishness*" (*ibid.*, 56, emphasis original). As the 'dominant core', however, there must also come caution in developing a specifically English identity: "[p]laying up Englishness […] would have threatened the unity and integrity" of British nationalism (Asari et al, 10). This results in a "more fluid or 'fuzzy' relationship

between Englishness and Britishness", an "elasticity" not found elsewhere in Britain (Langlands, 64) which perhaps goes some way to explaining the lack of distinction between these identities as well as the reasoning behind not seeking to distinguish them.

Medievalism and Nationalism

Having established heritage as an element of nationalism, it is evident that this is comparable to the ways in which I discussed medievalism in Chapter II. As such, I would return to certain topics in order to explore how these have contributed to British national identity, from popular constructions of Vikings during the nineteenth century as well as relating this to their representation in medievalist media. The medieval imaginary was central to the construction of a national identity in Victorian Britain (Ferré, 136): the "rediscovery of an idealised […] age of national greatness" provided Britain with "heroic ancestors […] and historical continuities" (Langlands, 59). The Middle Ages, depicted as a "golden age of [… national] heroes", served as an ideal platform for emerging nationalism in Britain, and elsewhere in Europe (Smith, A.D., 1991, 89). The nationalistic proliferation of the medieval era as a "mythico-legendary past" (Arnold, 167) allows people to "read themselves as a unique community with a […] distinctive culture" and a collective history.

Indeed, Britain imagined itself as having a "noble heritage" (Smith, A. D., 1991, 92) that meant it was "linked to the medieval past by a unique kind of continuity", a mentality which remains prevalent in modern medievalist media (Emery and Utz, 3).

This sense of continuity with an imagined Middle Ages constructs the medieval as essentially British history. Sturtevant observes that his study participants "projected their own […] upbringings upon their understandings of the Middle Ages", often locating the period entirely within "Britain, or England" regardless of a narrative's geographical setting or the nationalities of characters (42; 196). He argues that this "shows how entrenched the idea of Middle-Ages-as-England is in […] the historical consciousness" (44; 196). Furthermore, this conception of the Middle Ages as "'our' origins" can be seen to define "'us' as much as" the medieval period itself (Stafford, 2). As has been explored, the Middle Ages are "both positive […] and negative". As such the Middle Ages are "both what has shaped 'us', by virtue of their place at 'our' roots and origins, and the alien and 'other' against which 'we' are defined" (*ibid.*, 3).

Considering the Middle Ages as representative of Britain may be considerably more difficult for the audience in a film such as *The Viking* which explicitly promotes the American 'Vinland' origin myth. Leif Ericsson was, according to an intertitle, "the first white man [to] set foot on the shores of the New World" (see Figure 45). This notion of Norse settlement in America was wildly speculated on – likely as it provided a narrative with a sense of continuity to a much longer history for the fledgling country which also better aligned with peaceful Christian values than the violent reality of colonisation in the United States. This is evidenced in *The Viking*, particularly by one wide shot as Leif's party reaches the shore that depicts Ericsson planting a wooden cross on the beach, in the centre of the frame, before the Vikings drop to their knees in praise (see Figure 46). This origin myth was not supported by any significant evidence until the 1960 discovery of the L'Anse aux Meadows archaeological site in Newfoundland, three decades after the release of Neill's film.

Despite this, *The Viking*'s ending overtly states the film's aim of propagating this idea, without any subtlety. The film concludes with a final intertitle claiming that Leif's tower can be found in Newport, Rhode Island before cutting to a shot of the supposed stone structure in then-present-day America.[3]

However, *The Viking* does also feature the locales of England, Norway and Greenland during the majority of the film so may also figure into Sturtevant's notion of anglicising the medieval (196). Nevertheless, this film is the exception to the rule; the other texts I have discussed all revolve largely around England (usually Wessex and Northumbria) or take place in a vaguely Scandinavian setting. As such, the audience may well be able to interpret these Viking narratives as British history. In this, medievalist media can be seen as what Hobsbawm terms the 'invention of tradition' in that they "attempt to establish continuity with a *suitable* historic past", even if it is a continuity which is "largely factitious" (1-2, emphasis mine).

It may be pertinent to note here – particularly because some people, as I outlined above, do not, or cannot, associate Vikings with their personal identity but continue to find them significant nationally (Whitehead, 302; see also Sturtevant, 215) – that it may seem incongruous to discuss a collective, national identity alongside a sense of self. However, "the self is composed of multiple identities" (Smith, A. D., 1991, 4); national identity forms one part of the whole. That said, national identity can often prove more impactful, which allows for exploring or 'discovering' other aspects of self-identity under the rubric of nationalism:

[3] The theory of Norse construction of the Newport tower was purported by Carl Christian Rafn in 1837 and the idea gained popularity throughout the century, leading to its inclusion in Neill's 1928 film. However, later in the twentieth century, this claim was disproven when the Old Stone Mill was dated as a seventeenth-century structure.

> a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of collective personality and distinctive culture. It is through a shared, unique culture that we are enabled to know 'who we are' in the contemporary world. By rediscovering that culture we 'rediscover' ourselves, the 'authentic self' (*ibid.*, 17).

In opposition to this view of national identity, Billig argues that with the ever-growing globalism of the modern world, the "differences between national cultures" are being eroded and, as a result, the "nationally imagined identity is diminishing in importance" (132). As such, "people feel lost in the fluid conditions" and "individuals no longer have a firm […] sense of their self" (136). However, a recurrent answer to crises of identity "was certainly, and remains, the nationalist solution" wherein individual identity becomes subsumed in the "collective cultural identity of the nation" (Smith, A. D., 1991, 97).

Perhaps this notion of national identity is, at least in part, why it is possible to observe efforts to reinvent and commemorate even negative aspects of history in medievalist media as nationalised heritage. Nationalism is then, in this sense, a "search [… for] roots" (Smith, A. D., 1991,98), much as medievalism is a "quest for […] real roots" (Eco, 1998, 65), in order to realize individual identity through the collective. Indeed, a medievalist film will often present "history as the story of individuals". Yet, the "[re]solution of their personal problems" in the space of the narrative is offered as a substitute for broader sociocultural issues: "the personal

becomes a way of avoiding [or addressing …] difficult or insoluble social problems" (Rosenstone, 1995, 57).

It has been shown thus far that "[collective] memory is an important constitutive element of [national] identity formation" (Smith, L., 60; see also Guttormsen, 81) which, through heritage, enables people to feel communal connections at a national level (Smith, L., 66). National memory is collectively imagined, like the nation itself, "by people who have never seen or heard of one another, yet […] regard themselves as having a common history" (Gillis, 7). Throughout its history, we can observe that Britain has repeatedly "invented a notion of a [common] past" (Foot, 197-198).

Indeed, a nation "must have its history, its own collective memory", but this must also involve "collective forgetting" (Billig, 38; see also Gillis, 7). While this is true to some extent, as outlined in the prior exploration of heritage, where certain portions of the past are selectively omitted, Billig asserts that "nations forget the violence which brought them into existence" (38). However, even a cursory glance at the medievalist media I have discussed suggests that the contrary is the case. Historical narratives are, in fact, often employed "to work through issues […] in relation to violence and national identity" (Groot, 2009, 208). Violence in these examples, as well as numerous others, is not forgotten but vividly recalled and reimagined. Therefore, counter to Billig, I would posit that historical violence is 'distanced' and thus made justifiable, even admirable or desirable (Whitehead, 92). The aggression of Vikings is superlative and intentionally emphasised; as such, it

can be seen as an aspect of heroic mythography in medievalist media, as I discussed in Chapter I.

Medieval heritage in Britain, then, either through the remembering and manipulating or through the purposeful omission and amnesia of certain historical narratives, "may take over the desire for preservation" of the historical record in favour of a "biased image" of the period (Ferré, 137). Above, I discussed how, in the nineteenth century, the Vikings and Norse mythology were employed to "enact […] dramas of national pride", exemplifying the ways in which "medievalism often functions as a buttress for patriotic sentiment" (Arnold, 169). To this point, it is evident that the "mythic image of the Vikings was recursively constructed […] against a backdrop of developing nationalism" in order to "express, reinforce, and challenge notions of our collective identity" (Tveskov and Erlandson, 45). A similar nationalist projection is observable in representations of Vikings in medievalist media. Medievalism provided, and still provides, nationalised history that satisfies a "yearning for […] a heroic past" (Smith, A. D., 1991, 91). In other words, we can see that "[c]ollective memories […] created from heroic narratives, origin myths, and legends" are an important factor in developing a cohesive national identity (Guttormsen, 81; see also Smith, A. D., 1991, 14).

British Barbarians

One might suggest that the "relationship between the Modern West and its Viking past […] gives rise to these myths" as representative of "a past identity, a repressed

self" (Aronstein, 2013, 73). Vikings arguably "became a fashionable subject in Britain precisely *because* they were ancient heathen barbarians" and that due to this they were "romantically described as […] the opposite of the corrupt modern and enlightened civilization" (Whitehead, 45, emphasis original). However, as Bishop notes, Victorian Britain, in developing its national identity, also "rediscovered its […] Anglo-Saxon past [… and] their pre-conquest homeland" in which they "found […] barbarians" (Bishop, 55). Opposed to the images of Vikings which revelled in their barbaric nature, nineteenth-century artists "chose to portray their Anglo-Saxon ancestors" in ways that would "elide that savageness" and thus "manipulated […] history in order to represent their own society through […] an imagined national past" (*ibid.*, 56). Moreover, "depictions that *were* chosen are more complex than a simple denial of this savage past" and instead a "fantasy informed less by […historical] evidence […] than by the nationalistic aspirations" of the artists (*ibid.,* 65) in an effort to reconstruct the Middle Ages into "an image of their imperial present" (*ibid.,* 73).

However, I do not suggest that a historical referent is not essential to the present reverence of Vikings. It may be true that there are "[p]eople around the world […] who associate themselves with a Scandinavian heritage", evidenced by "the erection of numerous statues and other memorials to the Vikings, […] from the American continent to New Zealand" (Guttormsen, 82). However, I would argue that the notion of a Viking ancestry holds a particular resonance in countries which can claim a more significant connection to their Viking history – such as Britain or Norway – which is in turn reflected in both the production and reception of Viking imagery. In the American medieval imaginary, Vikings are placed "firmly in the realm of

fantasy", contrasting British ideas which "contain their own fantasy element but also have extensive historical, archaeological and philological sources on which to build" (Service, 25). In Britain, as in Scandinavia, collective memory of the Vikings "consists of a mixture of historical facts and […] fabrications" (Whitehead, 298). Thus, "modern Britain's Vikings are part fantasy, part "reality", both re-created and combined to fit contemporary needs" (Service, 25).

Contrary to my argument that Vikings contribute to part of British national identity, Richards asserts that "it is the Anglo-Saxons who have generally been regarded as the ancestral English, whereas the Vikings are definitely *them*, not *us*" (63, emphasis original). He suggests that whilst there may persist a sense of admiration for certain Viking achievements and characteristics, Vikings are not regarded as "our ancestors" (*ibid*.). However, Richards concedes that in nineteenth-century Britain, Vikings underwent a 'reinvention' based on "Victorian notions of race, valour, and enterprise" in order to compare them with "Victorian entrepreneurs and explorers" (*ibid.*, 119). In the nineteenth century, the Viking was presented through popular constructions as a "man who was a genuine, heroic fighter, masculine and brave, yet strongly dedicated to his family and society" (Whitehead, 300). Translators of the Icelandic sagas as well as novelists expressed "veneration for the heroic spirit of […the Vikings as Britain's] ancestors" and offered the notion that "the British were heirs to a glorious Nordic past" (Hammer, 139).

The Vikings were designed to be "the embodiment of the most important Victorian values" (Whitehead, 47; see also Guttormsen, 89). They were constructed as "the ideal Englishmen" (*ibid.*; see also Frank, 28) and thus "part of a new emerging national identity in Britain" (*ibid.*, 51). In the association of Vikings with 'British

values', these popular images were used to "justify and strengthen national identities" by "cast[ing] a positive light on British heritage, nationality, [and] colonialism" (*ibid.*, 47-48). The Vikings, then, were "no longer perceived as savage foe[s] but as icon[s] of the nation" (Frank, 28). Collective memory, it has been acknowledged, provides a sense of continuity and community with the past and a "demystification" of differences, allowing Vikings to be transmuted from being the enemy of Britain to being regarded as British themselves (Schama, 22-23).

After the nineteenth century, despite having been constructed to represent nationalistic values of the period, Vikings did not slip back into obscurity as mere barbarians. Rather, they were subsequently used to reflect "anxiety and regret for […] British imperial decline" (Barnes, G., 152). In medievalist media, we can observe that Vikings "kindle nostalgia" (*ibid.*) for a nationalised "history that never happened" (*ibid.*, 142). That is, a desire not for the actual Middle Ages but for medieval heritage, and for heroes, that resonate with contemporary society.

The use of Vikings as national heritage may be due, at least in part, to a notion of Viking lineage across Britain. There are several communities, in the north of Britain in particular, which possess "a particular pride in having Viking heritage". These areas consider Vikings to be "local folk heroes"; communal activities and institutions "reinforce the place of Vikings at the heart of contemporary local culture" (Griffiths and Harding, 3; see also Whitehead, 94). This is observable, for instance, in Shetland, where Vikings are considered to be an important part of the region's history: "the first written records of Shetland are really the Norse sagas" (Shetland, 2019). This is epitomised by a series of fire festivals known as Up Helly Aa, during

which people celebrate their Nordic heritage by dressing up as Vikings and burning wooden dragon-ships as bonfires (see Figure 47).

The sense of Viking heritage may be more prevalent in places such as the Shetlands, the Isle of Man or York, where there was considerable Viking influence in the Middle Ages, but throughout Britain the Vikings maintain "a real historical resonance" (Griffiths and Harding, 3): "awareness of a sharing in a Viking past has spread beyond its most visible and well-known centres in Britain" (*ibid.*, 5). Indeed, it remains observable in areas which are not so demonstrative in their commemoration of Viking history that "hints of Scandinavian heritage are widely […] understood and appreciated" (*ibid.*, 3). Even where Vikings were "formerly viewed with disdain as barbarian outsiders" they can be seen to have been, in relatively recent history, "reclaimed as prestigious and dynamic forebears" (*ibid.*, 6).

Additionally, it might, at first glance, appear counterintuitive to discuss British nationalism in relation to media made outside of the United Kingdom, or international collaborations "for which the national has little meaning" (Higson, 2009, 222), such as *The Vikings*. However, I would argue that the specifics of production and the geographical locations of the companies creating these popular representations are less significant than how the audience receives, and perceives, them. Consider the castle-storming scene in Fleischer's film. The Viking invaders, for the most part, wear clothes of lighter hues (primarily shades of brown) with brightly coloured shields. Their heads are mainly uncovered or, if not, they are adorned with lustrous golden or silver helms. In contrast, the English in this scene are uniformly garbed in dull black chainmail from head to toe; only their shields, bearing a red-on-white cross, identify them as English (see Figure 48). This simple

distinction dehumanises the English soldiers, making them appear almost mechanical. As such, this clearly signifies to the audience that they are the antagonists by following generic conventions, particularly in regards to medievalist media, of distinguishing between good and bad characters (Nickel, 236).

However, *The Vikings* was not regarded as anti-English in this. In fact, the film was a major success in Britain, peaking in third position at the box office in the year of its release (Manchester Guardian, 1959). This raises the question of why a British audience would enjoy watching a film in which the English are represented as villains alongside Vikings, who, as I mentioned earlier, are often depicted as violently villainous themselves. I would suggest that this is due to the perception of the Vikings as *British* heroes. They may be invading Britain, fighting against the English, speaking with American accents; however, as I have argued, the audience is still able to perceive the Vikings as a part of British history. As Higson observes, "British screens have been dominated by Hollywood films" (1995, 1). Therefore, as Thomas Elsaesser suggests, it is difficult for audiences to consider American media as "totally other", since it has become an "integral and naturalized part of the popular imagination of most countries" (cited in *ibid.*, 8).

Moreover, heritage itself is dependent upon perception; it is "a gaze or way of seeing" (Smith, L., 52). As such, only those inclusive in the national identity may 'see' said heritage (Lowenthal, 1998, 8). In other words, "we alone understand our legacy, […] construe it as we feel it ought to be" (*ibid.*, 18). Whitehead offers the example of an Italian woman, "someone sharing no cultural ties" with the Vikings. She viewed them as "an outside invading force which she could not […] identity with" and therefore she could not "justify their actions" (153). Moreover, she "did

not consider the Vikings to be a part of" national identity in Britain (196). Whereas British people, Whitehead found, held positive ideas of the Vikings and considered them as relevant to contemporary society, providing "a direct link [between … the] past and [the] present". They "believed the Viking spirit was […] admirable and had been carried on" in Britain (154).

Some go so far as to posit that, because of the Vikings' settlement in Britain, rather than merely pillaging, even contemporaneously the "boundary between Scandinavian and insular culture was porous" (Frank, 23). Richards argues that there was in fact a "complex sequence of assimilation between peoples of different language, culture, and religion" resulting in "the creation of hybrid identities" such as "Anglo-Scandinavian" (76). As such, in the "political and religious m[ê]lée" of medieval Britain, some people may have "adopt[ed] Viking culture by choice or by compulsion" (Griffiths and Harding, 2). There is even written evidence to suggest that even "shortly after the raid on Lindisfarne", there were people in Britain "imitating the appearance of the pagan Northmen" (Frank, 25; Bishop 57-58).

Regardless of the actuality of such contemporaneous cultural exchange, the notion that Vikings did contribute to British culture has been commonly perpetuated since at least Victorian times. Present society, it would appear, regards "Viking heritage as part of British identity" (Whitehead, 215). However, as I outlined in the previous chapter, there is a dualism prevalent in popular perceptions of Vikings – they are both heroic and barbaric. In Britain, this is especially true, as Vikings are regarded as both "raiders *and* settlers", they are "simultaneously part of 'us' and 'the other'" (*ibid*., 288, emphasis original). British people are "able to consider the Vikings […]

as barbaric warriors […] yet finding them relatable and redeemable because they ultimately became part of [British] society" (*ibid.*).

It can be observed, then, that people consider Vikings "as part of the internal […] social structure, but at the same time as standing outside of it" (*ibid.*, 156; 20). As I have argued, in Britain, popular imaginings of the Vikings combine with "historical facts", shaping them into figures which are "imagined and unreal yet immediate and relevant to modern […] society" (*ibid.*, 20). To reiterate, British people, despite endowing them with nationalistic ideals and characteristics, still understand the Vikings as "barbaric warriors [… yet find] them relatable and redeemable" as, by not only pillaging but settling in Britain, they "became a part of society" (*ibid.*, 288). That the Vikings are represented as "both positive *and* negative", might be seen as an example of society creating "a split image […] to address and preserve both its virtues as well as its depravities" (Whitehead, 75-75, emphasis original). However, the "heroic or villainous acts of the Vikings" are not entirely separated in a simple bipartition (*ibid.*, 76), nor are their negative aspects erased. Rather, this side of the Vikings is justified, excused, rationalised and reinterpreted in a positive, or at least neutralised, manner through "historical distancing" (*ibid.*, 92).

Through the process of 'distancing' a national past, people can "take pride in the 'negative' or difficult" aspects of "their ancestors and history" (Whitehead, 258). It is important for the British to translate their perceptions of Vikings in this way; if they are "part of the national identity and history of the nation", which I have argued that they are, then "they *must* have redeemable features" (*ibid.*, 268), even if those characteristics would not be acceptable by modern standards. Some British people might believe "that Vikings did horrible things for morally justifiable reasons" (*ibid.*,

297; 248). For others, the past may seem "so unreal and incomprehensible" that it is possible to forget, or ignore, the fact that "Vikings impacted real human beings" (*ibid.*, 264). In other words, even if the Vikings are considered to be "thieves and murderers", British people can still "[feel] proud of being their descendent[s]" and of their contributions to "national heritage and identity" (*ibid.*, 264). Therefore, it is evident that, while people may be hesitant or unable to relate Vikings to their individual, personal identities, they are "important for […] national identity and the nation as a whole" (*ibid*., 256).

However, it is important to note that the Vikings' place in British national identity is but "one part of a complicated, multi-cultural pool" (*ibid*., 26; 193). Indeed, British national identity has been "influenced by a variety of different cultures" that have at different times entered into the country's narrative, be it through forceful invasion or immigration (*ibid*., 20; 27). All national identities change, often considerably, over time; Britain's has, for example, at some points been influenced more by Celtic sources and at other times focused on distinctly English culture (Langlands, 60). However, the "cultural pluralism of Britain" can be viewed as evidence that "Britishness [… is not] an all-or-nothing concept" intended to "replace the ethnic loyalties" of the individual countries of the United Kingdom (*ibid.*, 62-63). Rather, this allows people to draw from their 'pool' of national identity to choose which part of their past they relate to most on an individual level, "be it Vikings, Romans or some other entity" (Whitehead, 27). In other words, a variety of "different, temporal identities" all contribute to the creation of a nation by combining "multiple stories, mixing together history and memory" (*ibid*., 56).

To conclude, I would argue that in the case of Vikings in Britain, it is as Lowenthal suggests: "we may be modest about what we *are*, but rarely about what we *were*" and even a past which is problematic can be admired or glorified (Lowenthal, 1994, 46, emphasis original; see also Whitehead, 54-55). As such, a culturally imagined legacy and ancestry to figures as violent, heathen, savage as the Vikings, as depicted by medievalist media, can still be celebrated. This is achieved by mythographically constructing Vikings as national heroes, even if doing so means that 'what we were' should include pagan barbarians. After all, they are the *greatest* barbarians and they are *our* barbarians (Service, 147).

Conclusion

To summarise, I began by discussing the representations of Vikings in selected medievalist media. I found that the textual representation of Vikings supported the complex, multifaceted ideas about them in popular imagination and that they were depicted as figures of both excessive violence and superlative ability. From this, I broached the topic of heroism and specifically mythic heroes. I used theories of Jung and Campbell to enter into a discussion on myth and argued that Vikings could, from this perspective, be considered as heroes. I argued that this is largely achieved through the depiction of Vikings as exceptional characters. Whether portrayed as indomitable warriors or able to perform superhuman feats of strength, a Viking "cannot be simply ordinary" (Service, 64). Likewise, the mythic hero is "a personage of exceptional gifts" (Campbell, 37).

I then questioned how Vikings, archetypal barbarians, could be simultaneously considered as heroic figures. I explored how their violence and villainous actions are comparable to their English counterparts. I concluded that as these negative aspects were not exclusive to Viking characters they could not prevent Vikings from being considered as heroic. In fact, I suggested that such behaviour contributes to their mythological heroism by providing audiences with "cathartic excess" (Service, 149-150; see also Barnes, T. L., 11). This dichotomy of heroism and barbarism led me to discuss in Chapter II how this gothic-romantic duality was prevalent in medievalist media more broadly. With this, I explored how ideas of the Middle Ages are culturally and imaginatively constructed in media, forming what Elliott and Haydock refer to as the 'medieval imaginary' (Elliott, 2011, 35; Haydock, 36). From here I

introduced notions of authenticity, over historical accuracy, and argued that medievalist media do not strive to reproduce *the* past but rather to reimagine *a* past which is believably, and desirably, realistic to modern audiences.

Subsequently, I argued that medievalist media can be seen as a form of popular history. It is "the way a huge segment of the population has come to understand [the Middle Ages …] even when we know they are fanciful or ideological renditions of history" (Rosenstone, 2006, 4-5). As such, the medieval imaginary is interlinked with collective memory. I added to this notion by an exploration of the psychological elements of mythography and how it relates to memories, fantasies and conscious invention. After this section, I argued that medievalist media thus constitute not a reflection of the actual historical period but multiple versions of the era according to what audiences believe it might have looked like; in other words, "the Middle Ages not as they were, but as they *should have been*" (Sturtevant, 94, emphasis original; see also Bennett, 99). Medievalism, I have maintained, is a popular rendition of history, culturally constructed and imbued with mythography in order to provide "the social cement that binds societies together" (Doty, 49). With this, I suggested that this was therefore a mythology of heritage, which continued into Chapter III.

In my final chapter, I addressed national heritage as a construction of the past predicated on authenticity, as with medievalist media. Here, I observed that medievalist media could thus be seen as contributing to heritage, in that medievalism presents an "altered [version of the past] in an attempt to fix or improve it" (Sturtevant, 93-94). This, I suggested, is comparable to how heritage "*upgrades* […and] *updates*" a nation's history by "anachronistically reading back from the present

qualities we want to see in past icons and heroes" (Lowenthal, 1998, 12, emphasis original). I then further addressed how medievalism factors into heritage and focused on British nationalism specifically. With this, I argued that Vikings are perceived as an important aspect of Britain's history and thus can be regarded as "ancestral figures" (Tveskov and Erlandson, 45) which contribute to British heritage and national identity, despite their less acceptable qualities. Even 'negative' portions of history are open to reinterpretation and justification, "to enable people to identity even with their 'dark past' as part of their own cultural and national identity" (Whitehead, 190).

British people can regard the excessive violence of the Vikings as not only acceptable but as heroic, in both a mythological and nationalistic sense. This is in part due to the contrasting notions of the Vikings. Firstly, that the Vikings were a catalyst in propelling Britain through the 'dark ages' by settling and (supposedly) introducing concepts to the nation that today are a considered integral to our idea of civilization, such as democratic politics and social equality for women. Secondly, the reverse of this is that the modern world is considered to be "a troubled present" (Aronstein, 2005, 2). The Vikings are thus presented as embodying values considered to be lost or lacking through the use of excess and exceptionalism, even where their actions translated directly to the present would be abominable. In other words, a Viking's violence is not intended to be "literally emulate[d]" but it may be representative of admirable qualities such as "courage and personal strength" which audiences "may attempt to appropriate […] into their own lives in nonviolent forms" (Lyden, 152).

A nation's history is neither static nor absolute but "ever remade" and "reanimated" in order to remain relevant. Through fabrication then, medievalist media provide the past as people need or wish it to be (Lowenthal, 1998, 19), often as a means of making sense of the present or the reinforcement of desirable modern ideologies. Indeed, Nietzsche argues that "the unhistorical and historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture" (cited in Landy, 2001, 2). This allows a societal glorification of a national legacy, even where historical facts might reveal it as unfavourable (Whitehead, 77): "To reshape is as vital as to preserve" (Lowenthal, 1998, 19). In other words, a nation "modifies its collective memories" through selective omission, invention and the exaggeration of particular people or events (all of which, can be found in the medievalist media I have studied above). This allows society to create a "glorified version of their past" which people take national pride in (Whitehead, 77).

By considering public history, which, as I outlined, relies to a large extent on historical media, as connected to collective memory, I found that: "[w]hat matters is not so much the history that is placed before us, but rather what we are able to remember, and what role that knowledge plays in our lives" (Frisch, 6; see also Anderson, S., 20). In other words, history on screen is not only about presenting images of the past. Rather, of more importance here is how medievalist media present "a *customised* version of the past" (Vercruysse, 51, emphasis original), and how that past is received and used by audiences as a means of understanding both history and the present. As Connerton asserts, "our experiences of the present largely depend upon our knowledge of the past, and […] images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order" (3).

It can be observed that collective memory, like myth, "is not limited to the past but also shapes the present and provides people with beliefs and guidelines for correct social behaviour" (Whitehead, 256). Myth provides "a model *of* how the world is believed to be [… and] a model *for* how people would like it to be" (Lyden, 63; see also Doty, 245). I have argued that medievalist media likewise functions in this manner, thus Vikings are able to be construed as mythic heroes. For Jung, heroic characters offer a guide to be emulated (Segal, 21). However, I argued, with regard to the violent nature of Vikings in medievalist media, that as a social model, heroic myths should be considered not as something to be imitated but rather as representative of desirable qualities (Campbell, 319; see also Lyden, 152). These may be: personally attainable goals such as physical or emotional strength; wider-scale sociocultural achievements, as with democratic politics; or, more intangible characteristics such as a sense of adventure. In concurrence with Campbell's view of myth as "amenable […] to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age" (382), I have asserted that popular depictions of Vikings (and medievalist media in general) are variable and thus their meaning may be changed to appeal to the present needs of the audience or society as a whole.

I have shown throughout this thesis that Vikings are not "merely the concerns of small numbers of academics, [… but] objects of enduring public and media fascination" (Griffiths and Harding, 27). However, with my focus on authenticity over historical accuracy, that is not to say that actual medieval history is irrelevant or unimportant. Rather, as I have suggested, medievalist media provides a means of *understanding* that history (Rosenstone, 2006, 4-5). Despite this, I have argued that

medievalist media need not be historically accurate nor even have a basis in "specific historical referents" (Emery and Utz, 2). Medievalism does not attempt to present 'what actually happened' and, more importantly, audiences are aware, at least to some degree, of this constructedness (Sorlin, 2001, 37). As such, the multiple imagined pasts of medievalist media do not subsume the official historical record but rather contribute to how people understand the Middle Ages (Edwards, 54).

I have suggested that, through medievalist media, British people perceive and construct Vikings as "an important part of national identity" (Whitehead, 287). The use of Vikings as national icons in Britain is largely, I have argued, due to their polyvalent images deployed in popular media, which are complex and often contradictory (*ibid*., 258). I have maintained that Vikings are perceived "as [both] mad, bloodthirsty warriors *and* honourable heroes" (*ibid*., 180, emphasis original). As such, even their negative attributes and actions can be justified and considered as positive in some way, which enables them to be accepted as part of Britain's past (*ibid*.). Indeed, Vikings are:

> seen as outsiders, yet […] regarded simultaneously as personifying the positive elements of national identity and collective social characteristics, such as courage and positive family values. This variable, paradoxical position of the Viking image within […] society demonstrates the fluidity and changeability of identity formations [… as any] aspect of the Viking myth can be used by the same individual in order to verify a variety of different, [and] sometimes conflicting things (*ibid*., 304).

In my introduction, I outlined that the overarching statement of this thesis was that Vikings, in medievalist media, are depicted as the epitomic barbarians, brushed with excessive violence and strange paganism, despite their concurrently "more rounded" representation as successful seafarers, farmers, or artisans (Aberth, 31). Ultimately, Vikings are still barbaric figures. Yet, this does not automatically relegate them to the role of villains; they may also be understood as mythic heroes. As such, I have argued that Vikings are mythologised through a national lens. It would appear that people consider them to be an important part of Britain's past, as evidenced by Whitehead's study (258). With this, through their representation in medievalist media, we can observe that Vikings are glorified as part of *our* heritage which audiences *want* to be part of a communal past (Barnes, T. L., 14).

In this thesis I have offered new insight on how representations of Vikings are construed as mythic heroes by applying the theories of Jung and Campbell to medievalist media. I have also explored how Vikings are utilised in the development of a national heritage in Britain as well as adding to the field of medievalism by furthering integral concepts and making use of parallel areas of study outside of medievalism. The most significant contribution gained from this thesis is a better understanding of Viking representations in relation to British identity construction and the ways in which negative aspects of history are nationally reconstituted and reimagined to be acceptable or even admirable. I would contend that is of particular importance that British people are able to better understand how historical media, and depictions of the dichotomous Vikings especially, are involved in national heritage in a period of identity crisis such as this (during Britain's exit from the European Union). Indeed, the "the nationalist solution" offers an answer to such

crises (Smith, A. D., 1991, 97). As I stated in my introduction this was not intended to be a definitive study and there is more to be said on this topic than I have covered here (how race and ethnicity impact Viking reception, for example). Yet, I have also offered a sufficient step in this field for future scholars to build upon in order to address further branches of heritage, identity and mythography regarding medievalist media more widely or Viking representations specifically.

As Tveskov and Erlandson succinctly state: "The voracious public appetite for both academic and popular depictions confirms the mythic and ideological significance of the Vikings […] and the importance of the heroic and nationalistic themes that are reinforced in these representations" (Tveskov and Erlandson, 36). Finally, then, I would conclude that popular depictions of Vikings in medievalist media are both heroic *and* barbaric. As such, Vikings in medievalist media provide a suitably flexible model for mythic heroes embodying elements of national heritage and identity. They are, and will continue to be, recurrently used by British audiences as polymorphic figures of a culturally imagined past.

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Illustrations

Figure 1.

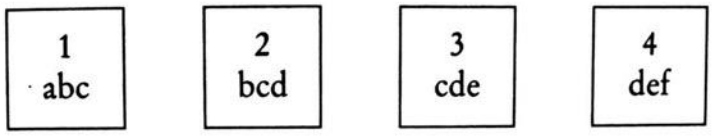


Diagram on familial characteristics linking different groupings
Eco, U. (2001) *Ur-Fascism*, 77.

Figure 2.

Ragnar attacks Enid and Edwin [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 3.

Chaotic Viking raid [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 4.

Ragnar enters the tent [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 5.

Erik enters the house [still]
Erik the Viking (1989).

Figure 6.

Danes in black armour [still]
Alfred the Great (1969).

Figure 7.

Danes burning a village [still]
Alfred the Great (1969).

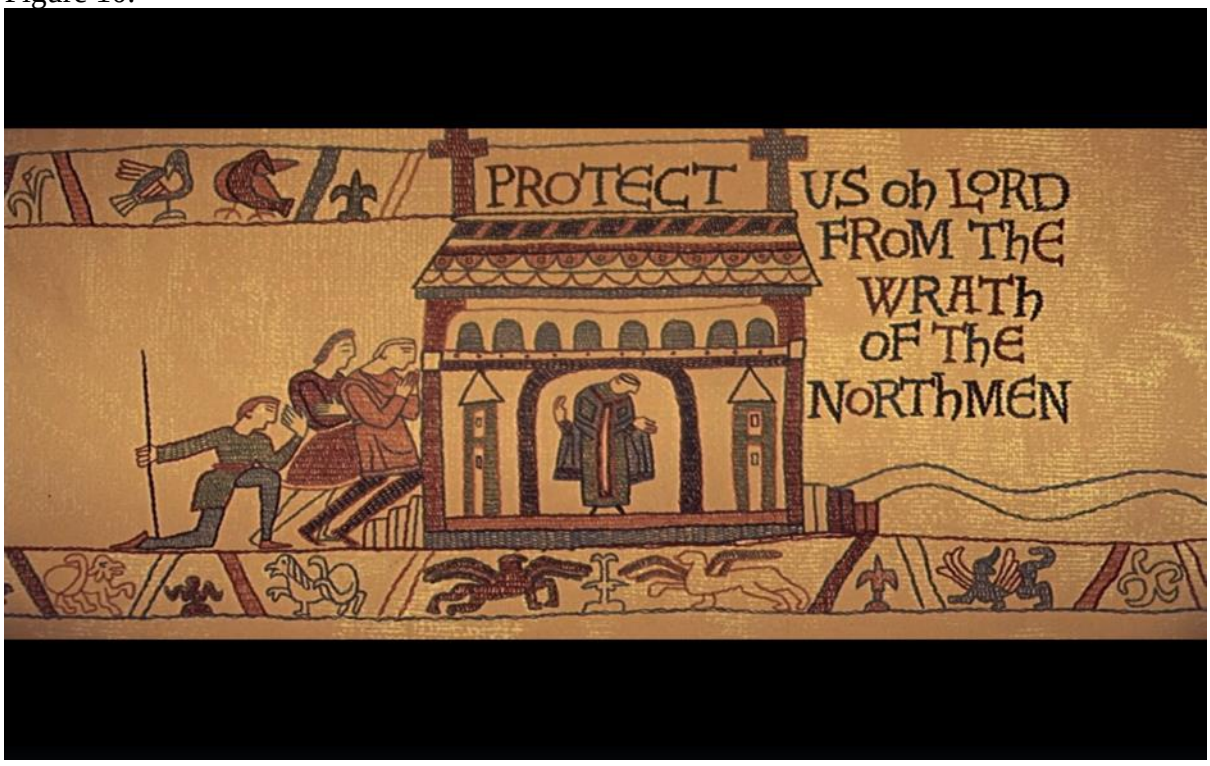
Figure 8.

Guthrum negotiating with Alfred [still]
Alfred the Great (1969).

Figure 9.

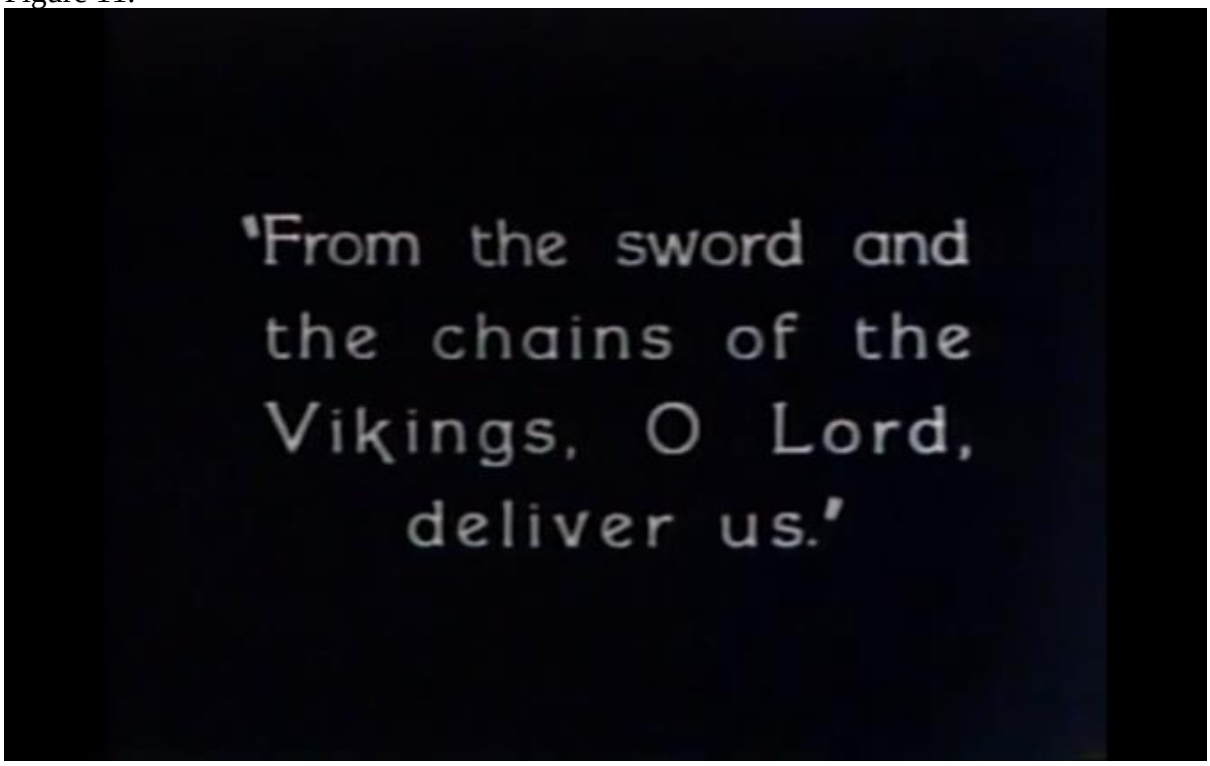
Alfred negotiating with Guthrum [still]
Alfred the Great (1969).

Figure 10.



Animated tapestry with prayer for protection from Vikings [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 11.



Intertitle with prayer for protection from Vikings [still]
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Figure 12.

Odin's bright light and gust of wind [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 13.

Odin surveys the battlefield [still]
Vikings S1E1.

Figure 14.

Athelstan on a Viking raid [still]
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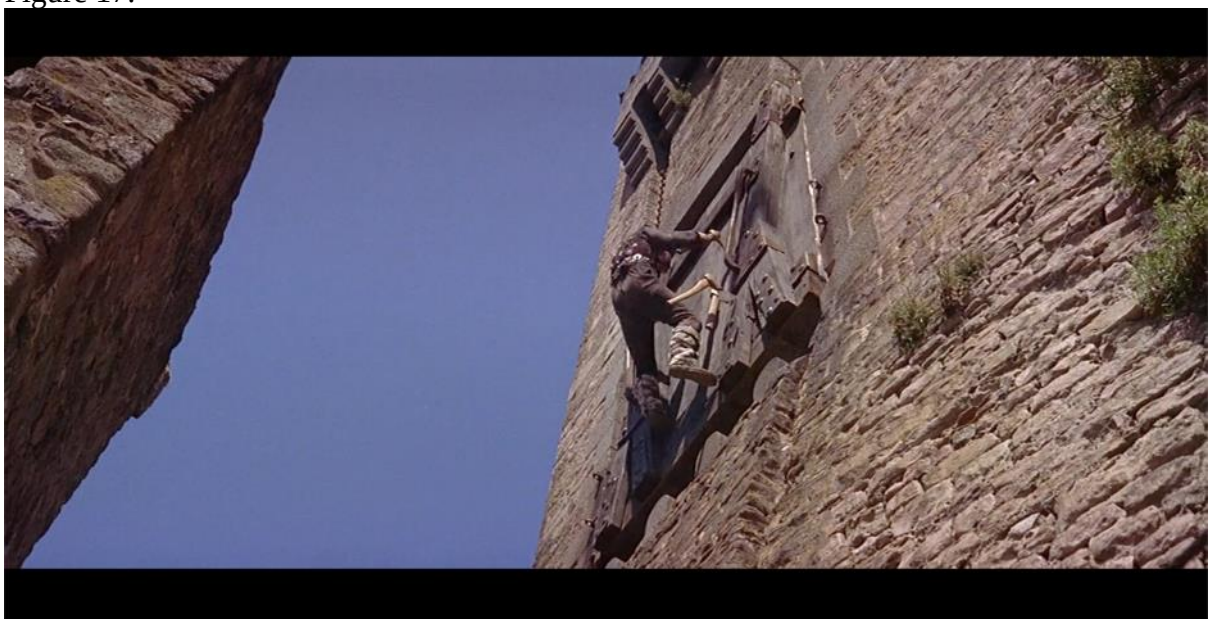
Figure 15.

Young Uhtred talking with Beocca [still]
The Last Kingdom S1E1.

Figure 16.

Uhtred talking with Ragnar at the Viking settlement [still]
The Last Kingdom S1E1.

Figure 17.



Einar's climb from below [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 18.

Einar's climb from the side [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 19.

Einar's climb from above [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 20.

Ragnar in combat with Haraldson [still]
Vikings S1E6.

Figure 21.

Ragnar rises from his coffin in Paris [still]
Vikings S3E10.

Figure 22.

Ragnar threatens Emperor Charles [still]
Vikings S3E10.

Figure 23.

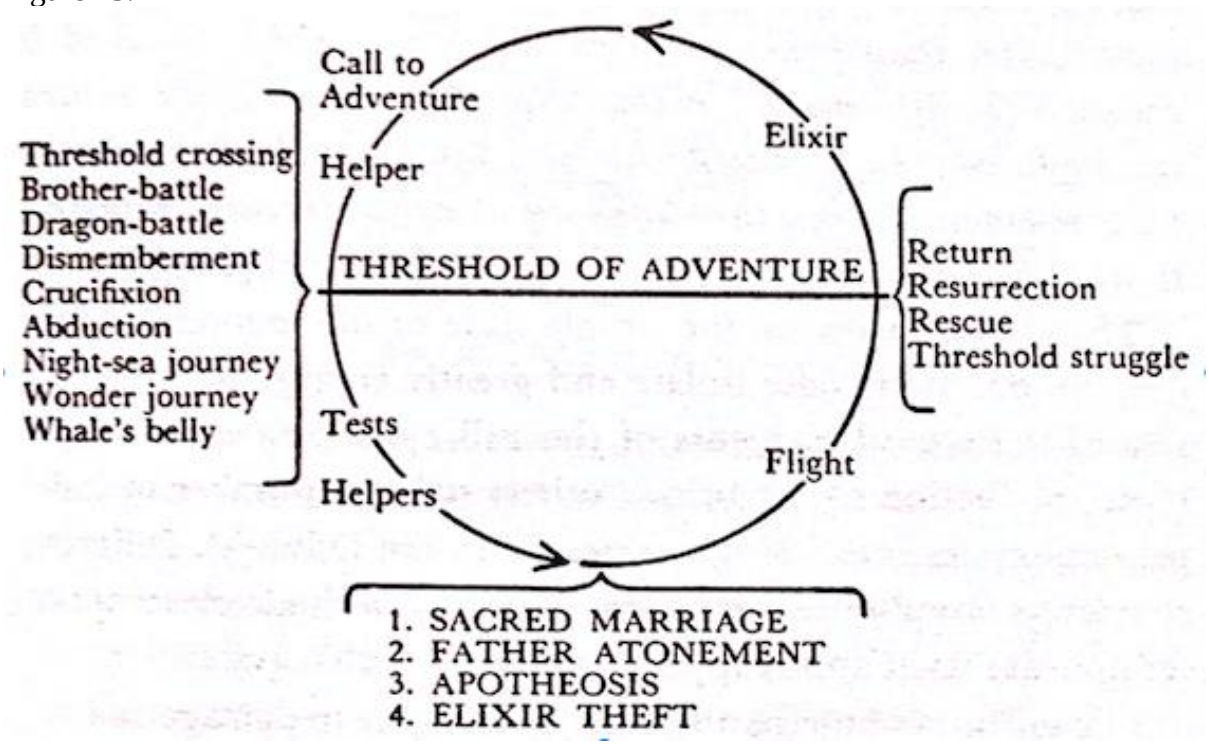


Diagram on elements of adventures in hero myths
Campbell, J. (1993) *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 245.

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Longship at sea [still]
The Viking (1928).

Figure 25.

Longships in the fog [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 26.

Longship in a storm [still]
Vikings S1E2.

Figure 27.

Helga binding her wrist [still]
The Viking (1928).

Figure 28.

Helga decides to purchase Alwin as a slave [still]
The Viking (1928).

Figure 29.

Helga and Sigurd discuss their new slaves [still]
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Figure 30.

Helga and Leif through a doorway [still]
The Viking (1928).

Figure 31.

Egil looks at Helga through a doorway [still]
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Figure 32.

Helga and Alwin through a doorway [still]
The Viking (1928).

Figure 33.

Leif looks at Helga through a doorway [still]
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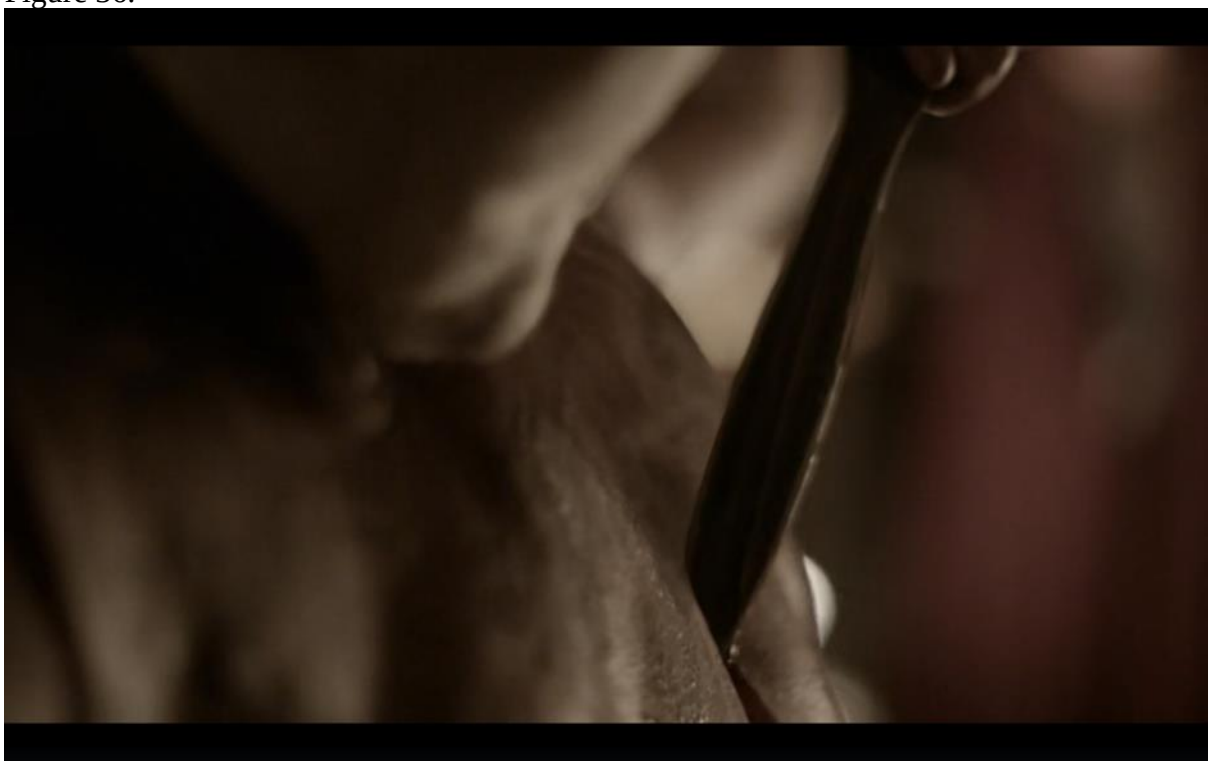
Figure 34.

Uhtred and Brida ride through the forest [still]
The Last Kingdom S1E2.

Figure 35.

Uhtred and Mildrith ride through the forest [still]
The Last Kingdom S1E4.

Figure 36.



Ragnar slices into Jarl Borg's back [still]
Vikings S2E7.

Figure 37.

Jarl Borg's execution by blood eagle [still]
Vikings S2E7.

Figure 38.

Knut attempts to rape a woman in Hexham [still]
Vikings S1E4.

Figure 39.

Lagertha and Ragnar make love [still]
Vikings S1E6.

Figure 40.

Aelhswith in Alfred's bedchamber [still]
Alfred the Great (1969).

Figure 41.

Guthrum and Aelhswith in bed [still]
Alfred the Great (1969).

Figure 42.

Athelstan's crucifixion [still]
Vikings S2E4.

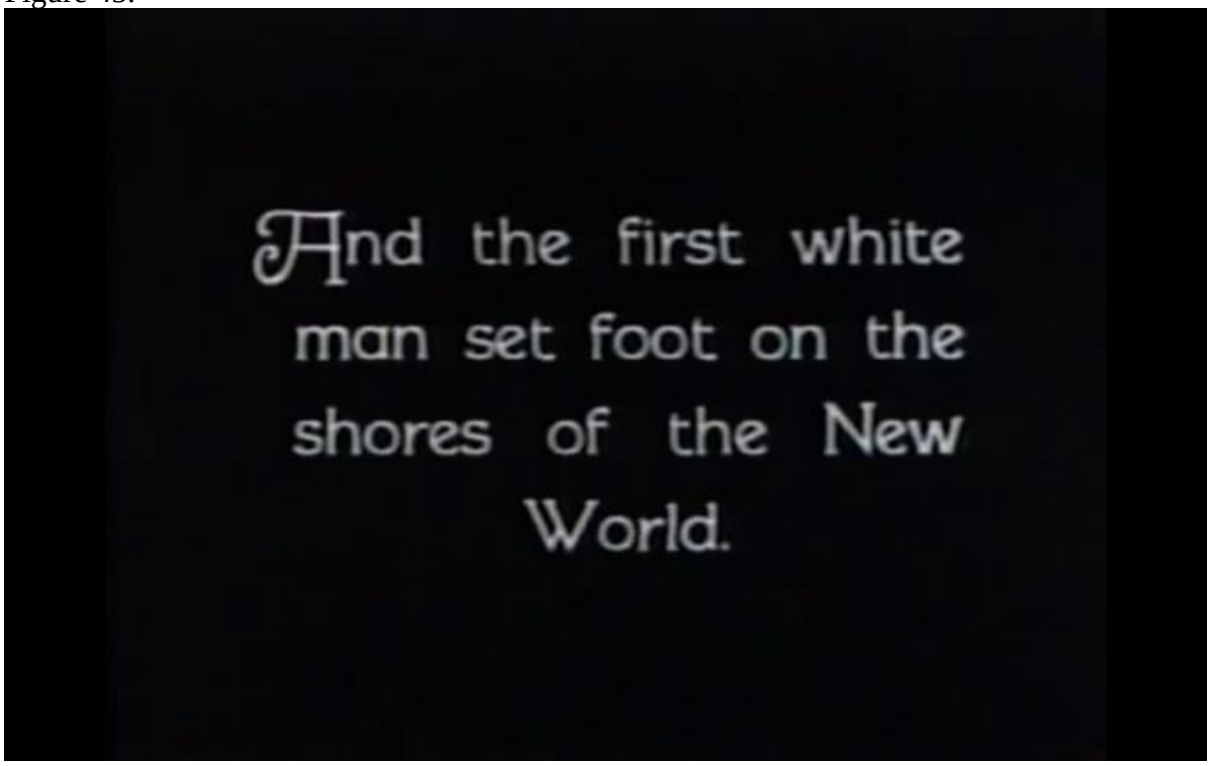
Figure 43.

Alfred and Ivar play chess [still]
Vikings S4E15.

Figure 44.

Einar loses an eye [still]
The Vikings (1958).

Figure 45.



Intertitle announcing Leif Ericsson's arrival in America [still]
The Viking (1928).

Figure 46.

The Vikings praise God [still]
The Viking (1928).

Figure 47.

Shetlanders dressed as Vikings for Up Helly Aa [online]
Available from www.shetland.org/things/events/up-helly-aa/lerwick-up-helly-aa
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Figure 48.

English soldiers defending the castle [still]
The Vikings (1958)